

Émile Zola

Nana

A new translation by Helen Constantine

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ÉMILE ZOLA was born in Paris in 1840, the son of a Venetian engineer and his French wife. He grew up in Aix-en-Provence where he made friends with Paul Cézanne. After an undistinguished school career and a brief period of dire poverty in Paris, Zola joined the newly founded publishing firm of Hachette which he left in 1866 to live by his pen. He had already published a novel and his first collection of short stories. Other novels and stories followed until in 1871 Zola published the first volume of his Rougon-Macquart series with the subtitle *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, in which he sets out to illustrate the influence of heredity and environment on a wide range of characters and milieus. However, it was not until 1877 that his novel *L'Assommoir*, a study of alcoholism in the working classes, brought him wealth and fame. The last of the Rougon-Macquart series appeared in 1893 and his subsequent writing was far less successful, although he achieved fame of a different sort in his vigorous and influential intervention in the Dreyfus case. His marriage in 1870 had remained childless but his extremely happy liaison in later life with Jeanne Rozerot, initially one of his domestic servants, gave him a son and a daughter. He died in 1902.

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ÉMILE ZOLA

Nana

Translated by
HELEN CONSTANTINE

With an Introduction and Notes by
BRIAN NELSON

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP, United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Translation © Helen Constantine 2020
Editorial material © Brian Nelson 2020

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First published as a World's Classics paperback 1992
Reissued as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 1998, 2009
New edition 2020
Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019042372

ISBN 978–0–19–881426–9
ebook ISBN 978–0–19–254536–7

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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INTRODUCTION

Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot will prefer to read the Introduction as an Afterword

ÉMILE ZOLA (1840–1902) occupies a distinctive place in the great tradition of French (and European) critical-realist fiction. His main achievement as a writer was his twenty-volume cycle of novels *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871–93), in which the fortunes of a family are followed over several decades. The various family members spread throughout all levels of society, and through their lives Zola examines the changing social, sexual, and cultural landscape of the late nineteenth century, creating an epic sense of social transformation. The Rougons represent the hunt for wealth and position, their members rising to commanding positions in the worlds of government and finance; the Macquarts, the illegitimate branch, are the submerged proletariat, with the exception of Lisa Macquart (*The Belly of Paris/Le Ventre de Paris*, 1873); the Mourets, descended from the Macquart line, are the bourgeois tradesmen and provincial bourgeoisie. Zola is the quintessential novelist of modernity, understood as a time of tumultuous change. The motor of change was the rapid growth of capitalism, with all that it entailed in terms of the transformation of the city, new forms of social practice and economic organization, and heightened political pressures. Zola was fascinated by change, and specifically by the emergence of a new mass society.

The power of Zola's vision comes from his commitment to the value of 'truth' in art. This was above all a moral commitment. The novelist's emphasis on speaking the truth was based on his conviction that the writer must play a social role: to represent the sorts of things— industrialization, the growth of the city, the birth of consumer culture, the workings of the financial system, the misdeeds of government, crime, poverty, prostitution —that affect ordinary people in their daily lives. And he wrote about these things ironically and satirically. Naturalist fiction represents a major assault on bourgeois morality and institutions. It takes an unmitigated delight— while also seeing the process as a serious duty—in revealing the vices,

follies, and corruption behind the respectable facade. The last line of *The Belly of Paris* is: ‘Respectable people… What bastards!’

The commitment to truth corresponded to a new integrity of representation. Zola opened the novel up to entirely new areas: the realities of working-class life, class relations, sexuality and the body; and his work embodied a new freedom of expression in their depiction. In his sexual themes he ironically subverts the notion that the social supremacy of the bourgeoisie is a natural rather than a cultural phenomenon; the more searchingly he investigated the theme of middle-class adultery, the more he threatened to uncover the fragility and arbitrariness of the whole bourgeois social order. His new vision of the body, entailing a greater explicitness of description, is matched by his new vision of the working class, combining carnivalesque images with serious analysis of its sociopolitical condition. In *L’Assommoir* (1877) he describes the misery of the working-class slums behind the public splendour of the Empire, while in *Germinal* (1885) he shows how the power of mass working-class movements had become a radically new, and frightening, element in human history. The attacks Zola sustained throughout his career for his purported obsession with ‘filth’ were largely political in nature—attempts by the establishment to discredit him. He was a reformist, not a revolutionary, and the denunciation of social injustice and hypocrisy embodied in his fiction is implicit, based on an aesthetic of ‘objectivity’; but it is no less eloquent for that—Zola never stopped being a danger to the established order. It was entirely appropriate that in 1898 he crowned his literary career with a political act, a frontal attack on state power and its abuse: ‘J’accuse…!’, his famous open letter to the President of the Republic in defence of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish army officer falsely accused of treason.

Nana

Nana is probably the most famous character in *Les Rougon-Macquart*. The novel that bears her name, published in 1880, is the ninth volume in the series. It consists of a number of episodes, or tableaux, in the short but spectacular life of Anna Coupeau, the fourth child of Gervaise Macquart. We first saw her as a young girl in *L’Assommoir* (1877), her father an abusive alcoholic, her mother Gervaise reduced to a similar degraded state. She works as a milliner’s assistant and dabbles in casual street prostitution.

She has a child by an unknown father when she is 16. Having escaped from the slums, in *Nana* she makes her mark first in the theatre, then enters the world of high prostitution, becoming the most celebrated courtesan in Second Empire Paris, wreaking havoc among the upper classes with her rampant sexuality.

The novel opens with a night at the Théâtre des Variétés in April 1867, just after the inauguration of the World Fair in Paris (the Exposition Universelle). Nana is 18. Zola describes in detail the performance of *La Blonde Vénus*, a fictional operetta modelled after *La Belle Hélène* by Jacques Offenbach (1819–80), in which Nana is cast as the lead. She is the talk of Paris, though this is her first stage appearance. When asked to say something about her talents, Bordenave, the theatre manager, explains that a star does not need to know how to sing or act: 'Nana has something else, for heaven's sake, and something that makes all the other stuff superfluous' (p. 6). At first the audience laughs, thinking her performance terrible, until a youth, Georges Hugon, cries out, '*Très chic!*' From then until the end of the play, Nana is in control of the audience, especially in the third act when she appears on stage virtually naked, in the flimsiest of veils, rousing the spectators to a frenzy.

> No one was laughing any more, men's intent faces were straining forward, their noses thin, mouths quickened and dry. It was as though a puff of wind, very gentle but charged with a dull sense of foreboding, had passed over. Suddenly the woman was emerging from the child, causing unease, bringing that madness of her sex, opening up unknown desire. Nana was still smiling but it was the knowing smile of the man-eater. (p. 24)

In the course of the novel Nana destroys all the men—aristocrats, high government officials, army officers, bankers, journalists—who pursue her, leaving a trail of bankruptcy, humiliation, and death. Symbol of profligacy and excess, she feeds insatiably on her lovers while remaining serenely indifferent to them. Her most notable victim is Comte Muffat de Beuville, Chamberlain to the Empress, an ageing and extremely devout aristocrat, whom she subjugates completely, forcing him to undergo every kind of indignity. In a famous scene, she makes him wear his Court uniform, then take it off, and trample and spit on it.

Nana becomes a celebrity ('queen of the boulevards'):

> Her photographs were displayed in shop windows and she was mentioned in magazines. Heads turned as she went by in her carriage on the boulevard and everyone murmured her name, with admiration, as though doing homage to a sovereign . . . And the wonder was that this buxom girl, so

awkward on stage, so comical as soon as she tried to play a respectable woman, was bewitchingly alluring offstage, without any effort on her part. She . . . was the aristocrat of vice, splendid, rebellious, walking all over Paris society like an omnipotent mistress. She set the tone and noble ladies copied her. (p. 244)

While Nana becomes ‘a fashionable lady’, Muffat’s wife, Comtesse Sabine, a pillar of respectable society until her husband has an affair with Nana, becomes addicted to a life of sexual promiscuity. The working-class courtesan and the upper-class woman grow progressively less and less distinguishable.

Nana suddenly disappears, her belongings are auctioned, and no one knows where she is. But even her absence generates all kinds of rumours and stories:

When her name was mentioned amongst the ladies and gentlemen of her acquaintance, the strangest stories circulated, everybody gave conflicting and fantastic information. She had won the heart of a viceroy, she lived deep in the precincts of a palace reigning over two hundred slaves whose throats she cut for her amusement. No, that wasn’t the case at all, she had ruined herself with a huge Negro, a sordid affair that had left her without a penny to her name, wallowing in the debauched squalor of Cairo. Two weeks later there was universal astonishment when someone swore they had encountered her in Russia. A legend was being created (p. 363)

She has left her sickly infant son in the care of an aunt near Paris, but when a smallpox epidemic breaks out, she returns to nurse him; he dies, and she contracts the disease herself. Zola has Nana die a horrible death, in a room at the Grand Hôtel, her smallpox (a euphemism for syphilis) the outward form of the social disease she represents. She is intended to reflect Second Empire society itself—a society given over to the pursuit of pleasure, built on its urges and appetites. Her ravaged body thus comes to symbolize the disfigurement of the social body as a whole, the Empire in all its corruption and dissipations. The allegorization of Nana’s life and death is clear: she was born in 1852, the year of Louis-Napoleon’s *coup d’état*; the novel opens in the year of the great Exposition Universelle, with the Empire at its most self-congratulatory and carnivalesque; and she dies on the very day that war with Prussia is declared, a prelude to the Empire’s collapse.[1] A jingoistic crowd is passing along the boulevard below, but the atmosphere is heavy with a sense of foreboding. The narrative looks forward to the debacle of military defeat, the fall of the Empire, and the bloodshed of the Commune. An ironic rewriting of the opening chapter, the last chapter gathers together all the characters (at least those who have survived) who witnessed Nana’s triumphant appearance in *La Blonde Vénus*. In the final

scene, however, the men turn away from her, afraid of being contaminated. Her hideous corpse is left alone in the empty hotel room.

> Venus was decomposing. It was as if the virus she had caught from the gutter, from the carcasses left by the roadside, this ferment with which she had poisoned a whole race, had now come to the surface of her face and rotted it. (p. 376)

Prostitutes and Courtesans

Prostitution caused much alarm in the nineteenth century. The prostitute was a favourite image for male writers wishing to illustrate the danger of uncontrolled female sexuality. Zola plays to remarkable effect in *Nana* on male fear (including, it might be said, his own) of the 'natural' woman, and in particular, fear that prostitutes might transgress established social boundaries and infiltrate the bourgeoisie and upper class. The novel illustrates, ultimately in apocalyptic vein, how, in the nineteenth-century social imaginary, the prostitute, whether a common streetwalker or a successful courtesan, became a threatening figure associated with disorder and the overturning of the naturalized hierarchies and institutions of society.[2] For the men of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, she represents their nightmares—the destruction of moral decorum, family life, patriarchal power, the social order itself. Maxime Du Camp, in his six-volume book on daily life in Paris, *Paris: Ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie jusqu'en 1870* (1869–75), attributed many of the ills of contemporary society to prostitution, characterizing it as a disease, a gangrene arising from the lower depths of society and invading the entire social organism. This vision of prostitution as a source of contamination is evoked in *Nana* in the article written by Fauchery the journalist, in which Nana is compared to a disease-carrying fly:

> She had grown up in the gutter, in the back streets of Paris. A tall, beautiful girl, with superb skin like a plant growing in a dung heap, she was avenging the wretched and the destitute from whom she had sprung. In Nana, the immorality that was being allowed to pollute the common people was rising to the surface and rotting the aristocracy. She was becoming a force of nature, an unwitting ferment of destruction, corrupting and throwing the structures of Paris society into disarray between her snowy-white thighs, churning it up, as women each month turn the milk sour. And it was at the end of the article that the comparison with the fly was made; a fly the colour of sunshine, escaped from the midden, a fly which sucks death from the carrion you are wont to see along the roads and which, buzzing and dancing, throwing out a dazzle of jewels, poisons men simply by flying in through the windows of palaces and landing on them. (p. 170)

Police records in 1866 indicated that there were 5,000 registered prostitutes in the city of Paris, and another 30,000 unregistered ones. Moreover, as Rupert Christiansen has noted, with Haussmann's redevelopment of Paris and the eradication of the central working-class areas of the city, 'streetwalking girls wandered away from their traditional purlieus in the Palais Royal up to the rich pickings of the glittering new Paris', where 'in the constant bustle and throng it became impossible to distinguish between a lady respectably on her own and a girl for hire'.[3] The architect Charles Lecœur wrote in 1870:

> Uncontrolled (that is to say, unregistered) prostitutes form the majority of the personnel of prostitution in Paris. They are everywhere, in the cafés-concerts, the theatres, the dance halls. One meets them in public establishments, railway stations, and even railway carriages. They are there on all the footpaths, in front of most of the cafés. Late into the night they circulate in great numbers on all the finest boulevards, to the great scandal of the public, which takes them for registered prostitutes breaking the rules, and thus is astonished at the inaction of the police in their regard.[4]

Regulation and control of prostitution became virtual obsessions of the bourgeoisie, especially during the decade following the fall of the Second Empire, when there was a strong desire on the part of the new government of the Third Republic to restore a sense of 'moral order', in expiation of the *fête impériale*. There was renewed emphasis on the requirement that prostitutes should be registered. Registered prostitutes or *filles soumises* (literally, submissive or compliant whores) had to submit to mandatory health checks. They could work independently or in a government-recognized brothel known as a *maison de tolérance*, where the prostitute would also live.[5] Registration could be done voluntarily or enforced following an arrest—as the result, for example, of a police raid of the sort described to Nana by her lover Satin:

> Satin put the fear of God in her about the police. She was full of stories about them. She used to sleep with someone from the vice squad just to have a bit of peace and quiet. He had twice intervened to let her off being registered. And nowadays she was afraid of being arrested again as it was obvious she was a prostitute. Nana should listen to her advice. In order to get their bonuses, the police arrested as many women as possible. They detained everybody, they shut your mouth by hitting you if you screamed, they knew they'd be supported and rewarded even when they had arrested a respectable girl among the crowd of others. In the summer, twelve or fifteen of them made raids on the boulevard, rounding up as many as thirty women in one night by closing off part of the pavement. […] Nana listened to her, and grew more and more frightened. (p. 213)

At the apex of the great prostitution pyramid was a kind of elite: the 'courtesans'. Nana is a composite figure based on several of these

celebrated women,[6] whose lives were built less on sex than on ostentation. They were glamorous status symbols for their male protectors and lovers, who flaunted their money by lavishing vast amounts on them. The expense of the courtesan became intrinsic to her allure, and the more money she had, the more she spent; extravagance became almost a professional duty. Thérèse Lachmann, a notorious Polish-born Jewish courtesan known as La Païva, had an opulent *hôtel particulier* built for her on the Champs-Élysées, where it stands today, a listed building, home of the Travellers' Club, and a monument to the lifestyle of the Second Empire courtesan.

Napoleon III's Second Empire was the golden age of the courtesan, for she embodied imperial society's delight in conspicuous consumption, its taste for show, its culture of leisure and pleasure. Indeed, the courtesan symbolized the regime itself. This is suggested by the connotations of the term coined for the courtesan's world: *demi-monde*, that is, a shadowy half-world in which nothing is quite what it seems and the image is frequently taken for the reality. The Second Empire always lived under the shadow of illegitimacy, for it originated in a *coup d'état*; and Virginia Rounding has written perceptively of Napoleon III's desire to draw a form of legitimacy from his illustrious uncle, Napoleon I:

> [The] imperial court could be seen as mirroring and sharing some of the essence of the *demi-monde*, not only in its ostentation but also in its shadowiness, its sense of unreality and its flair for imitation, and the women, like La Païva, who rose to startling prominence through an accumulation of wealth about whose origins it was best not to enquire too closely shared some of the characteristics of the Emperor who had arisen out of a lifetime of exile and relative anonymity to claim what he considered to be the inheritance of his uncle[7]

The *demi-monde* formed a kind of parallel world existing alongside the *haut monde*. The most illustrious courtesans became quasi-celebrities, enjoying prominent positions in society. During the 1850s, for example, Apollonie Sabatier kept a political and literary salon at her house in the Rue Frochot. It was frequented by the eminent writers Gustave Flaubert (1821–80) and Charles Baudelaire (1821–67). The latter even dedicated some of the poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) to her. 'The *demi-monde* knew how to copy the *haut monde* and yet at the same time the *haut monde* was not above copying the half-world, particularly where fashionable dress was concerned.'[8] T. J. Clark has written brilliantly about how the courtesan reflected the Empire's need for 'a representation of sex —representation here meant in its two main senses':

the *courtisane*'s great game was to play at being an honest woman; and she played very skilfully. Though not so well as to deceive her clients; that would have spoilt the whole thing. Her purpose was to pretend to be a woman of no identity and many: her admirers knew perfectly well that she had come from the *faubourgs* or the Parisian lower depths, and she even took care that her speech should indicate that freedom; for what she had to offer her guests . . . was the fact of her own falsity. It was her most lavish production[9]

While men were able to move relatively easily between the two worlds, they felt that 'virtuous' women—middle-class wives, mothers, and daughters—needed protection, lest they be corrupted. It was this fear of corruption that caused such disquiet among contemporary writers such as Maxime Du Camp when describing the difficulty of knowing whether respectable women were dressing like prostitutes, or prostitutes were dressing like respectable women. And it was this fear that lay behind the male pathologization of women and the female body—the splitting of women into 'housewife or harlot'—throughout the nineteenth century.

Theatre and Masquerade

The Théâtre des Variétés (which the manager, Bordenave, insists on calling his bordello) has symbolic value of various kinds. It is pre-eminently a space where the various levels of society come together, confront each other, and interact. Typical of most theatres of the time, it is 'a melting pot of all ranks and stations and nationalities, a place of unadulterated permissiveness, pleasure and displays, where all distinctions were effaced . . . to form a parodic society given over to the great leveller: sex'.[10] Courtesans and fashionable men-about-town mingle with aristocrats and prominent public figures like Comte Muffat, his wife the Comtesse Sabine, and his father-in-law, the Marquis de Chouard, a member of the Council of State. All fall under Nana's spell.

The metaphor of play-acting suggests, as noted above, that the Second Empire itself is a charade, a masquerade. It highlights the falseness of high society, which becomes progressively absorbed into the tinsel world of the theatre. This symbolic process of assimilation receives almost parodic expression in Chapter 5 when the Prince of Scotland visits Nana in her dressing room, accompanied by Comte Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard. Fontan, the comic actor who plays the king of the gods, happens to be

celebrating his birthday. He orders champagne, and the assembled actors and aristocrats, including the Prince, toast each other in mock solemnity:

> Bosc, with his purple tabard and his tin crown, steadied himself on his teetering legs and greeted the Prince like a monarch who receives the son of a neighbouring power. They raised their brimming glasses.
>
> ‘I drink to Your Highness!’ said old Bosc with a royal gesture . . .
>
> ‘To Venus!’ cried Fontan.
>
> Amiably the Prince raised his glass . . .
>
> And he drank it straight off. Comte Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard did likewise. It was no longer a joke, they were at Court. This world of the theatre recreated the real world in a solemn farce beneath the flame of the gaslights. Nana, forgetting she was wearing only her camiknickers and her tiny bodice, was playing the part of the great lady, Queen Venus, throwing open her little apartments to the heads of state. Into each sentence she threw in the words ‘Royal Highness’, made accomplished curtseys, treated the shambling Bosc and Prullière as if one were a sovereign and the other his minister. And nobody thought this was an odd mixture—the real prince, the heir to a throne, drinking an actor’s champagne and very much at ease in this carnival of the gods, in this masquerade of royalty, in the midst of a crowd of dressers and whores, showmen, and pimps. (p. 113)

The opening chapter in the theatre is echoed by the bravura scene at the races in Chapter 11: the Grand Prix de Paris at Longchamp. Here Zola plays once more on the interaction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ levels of society, and in particular on the staging of a spectacular upending of the normal hierarchy. The association of Nana with the Empire is now made stronger and clearer. Nana appears on the track in a magnificent carriage drawn by four white horses. At her side is her son Louis, named after the Emperor. She wears an exquisite dress in imperial colours, blue and white. While Muffat escorts the Empress Eugénie to her royal box, Nana holds court in her carriage. The other prostitutes and actresses are envious of her gorgeous landau and the splendour of her attire, but most of all of the fact that her lover Vandeuvres has named a filly after her. Nana ignores her namesake until the filly overtakes all her male competitors and wins the race. The crowd roars the horse’s name, ‘Nana! Nana! Nana!’, just as Nana’s name had been shouted out at the theatre. The young woman stands up on the seat of her landau to receive the crowd’s adulation, thinking it must be her they are applauding. Winning money on the race means little to her; what matters is ‘this unexpected victory whose glory made her queen of all Paris’ (p. 299). The crush of men round her landau ‘which had made her carriage the centre of the racecourse was reaching its apotheosis: Queen Venus amidst the folly of her subjects’ (p. 299). As Valerie Minogue has written:

Nana lords it over the crowds at the racecourse, just as she had dominated the audience in the theatre . . . And whereas, in the theatre, Nana was the object on whom the opera-glasses were focused, here Nana trains *her* opera-glasses on the crowd, and even on the Imperial box. Deriding the ill-dressed women in the exclusive weighing enclosure and commenting, with intimate details, on the body of the royal prince beside the Empress . . ., the Nana who stripped for the theatre-audience now metaphorically strips the audience.[11]

The physical decor of the theatre has rich metaphoric connotations. The description of the auditorium in the opening chapter reflects Zola's view of the tawdriness of the Second Empire: the huge crystal chandelier 'lit up the curtain, whose heavy crimson drapery, rich as that of some fabulous palace, was in stark contrast to the shabby surrounds, where large cracks were visible beneath the gilt' (p. 9). In Chapter 5 Muffat's journey backstage with the Prince of Scotland, through the noises and smells of the theatre—the mingled scents of greasepaint, sweat, women's perfume, and the 'dubious undergarments' (p. 109) of the female extras—inflames his erotic imagination. His long, unnerving walk through the wings, in which he gets lost, is a journey into his unconscious, prefiguring his entrapment in the labyrinth that is Nana. His backstage visit becomes a descent into the underworld. Almost unable to breathe, he is overcome by the dank, murky environment of the woman's sex: 'It was like a subterranean existence down there in the dark depths, men's voices sounding as if they were ascending from a cave' (p. 109). After watching Nana naked onstage through a peephole in the back of the set, he climbs the stairs to her dressing room: 'For a moment he had to catch hold of the iron balustrade that was warm to his touch, it seemed warm with life, he closed his eyes and with one breath filled his lungs with the whole sexuality of woman, as yet unknown, but which was now coming at him full in the face' (p. 125).

Even the non-theatrical spaces in the novel resemble the world of the stage. A case in point, as Ilona Chessid has noted, is the palatial town house Muffat buys for Nana in the Avenue de Villiers. Zola describes the delegation of various functions to specific areas of the house. A staircase in the kitchen, for example, leads to the street and therefore permits discreet exits and entrances. As Chessid puts it, Nana's chambermaid, Zoë, 'acts as stage manager of the elaborate production that is Nana's personal life'.[12]

Zoë arranged everything, sorted out even the most unforeseen complications. It was like a well-oiled machine, a theatre, regulated like a huge business enterprise, and functioned with such precision that for the first months there were no hitches or disasters. (p. 249)

Later, when Nana's life begins to run out of control, the 'production' takes on some of the qualities of farce. The house becomes 'a theatre run amok'.[13] Doors open and close, with men constantly coming and going, often having to be hidden by Zoë, who spends most of her time ushering in and concealing untimely clients:

> Ever since Zoë had started to make her calculated withdrawal, the management of the house was in such disorder that Muffat did not dare open a door, window, or cupboard. Nothing ran smoothly anymore, men were to be found all over the house bumping into one another. (p. 345)

'Theatre', as David Baguley has observed, 'is . . . the very essence of the world the novel depicts.'[14] This is true, not only in terms of the theatricality of the Second Empire itself, with its investment in show and self-aggrandizement, but also in terms of the sexual hypocrisy permeating upper-class society. Nana learns through Satin that respectability is an illusion, a simple matter of appearances:

> the most respectable-looking were the most depraved. The whole veneer cracked, the beast appeared, very demanding in his monstrous predilections, refined in his perversions. So Satin, little tart that she was, felt no respect; she was angered by the snobbish men in their carriages, asserting that their coachmen were nicer because they respected women and did not half kill them with their impossible desires. That high-class people could fall head first into the cesspit of vice like that was still a surprise to Nana who held on to prejudices about which Satin was busy disabusing her. (p. 212)

A blatant example of upper-class hypocrisy is the old rake the Marquis de Chouard. While endlessly deploring 'the disintegration of the ruling classes by the shameful compromises of modern immorality' (p. 318), he has led a life of barely concealed debauchery. A final humiliation for Muffat is his discovery of his father-in-law in bed with Nana.

Myth and Mayhem

One of Zola's aims was to use his fiction to demonstrate a number of 'scientific' notions about the ways in which human behaviour is determined by heredity and environment. His promotion of the pseudoscientific theories he expounded in his essay 'The Experimental Novel' (1879) was unremitting. Unfortunately, this helped to generate the deeply misleading notion that his writing was unimaginative, virtually non-literary; its formal qualities, particularly its poetic character, were obscured. It is still necessary, even now, to stress that Zola is above all a narrative artist. The

hallmarks of his work are his compositional skill, the expressive value of his descriptions, his remarkable use of metaphor, the sheer energy of his writing. His best novels, like *Nana*, are compelling because of their colour and intensity, their visionary power, their mythical resonance.

Flaubert put his finger on these qualities of Zola's work, and on the essence of his female protagonist, when he wrote in a highly appreciative letter that Nana 'becomes mythic without ceasing to be a real woman'.[15] The connotations of this comment are multiple: Nana's role as the Venus of vaudeville, the fact that she becomes the stuff of legend, and so on. Above all, Nana is 'mythic' in the sense that she is a construct of male sexual fantasies. Indeed, the men in the novel project on to her not only their fantasies but also their fears. She becomes a woman of fantastic proportions, incarnating the monsters of the male imagination. We most often see this monstrous Nana through the eyes of Comte Muffat, whose troubled gaze transforms Nana into a terrifying femme fatale. This is particularly pronounced in the scenes where she is naked. As Muffat watches her applying her make-up backstage at the Variétés, she is transformed into a devilish figure: 'In a confused way, Nana *was* the Devil, her laughter, her bosom, her bottom, she was swollen with vice' (p. 116). This nightmarish quality is most hysterical when Muffat, who has just read Fauchery's article allegorizing Nana as a disease-carrying fly, contemplates Nana's full nakedness as she stands preening herself before her bedroom mirror:

> Bent back, with her hips stuck out like that, she displayed the strong loins and firm breasts of an Amazon, muscly beneath the satin texture of her skin. A fine line, scarcely interrupted by the shoulder and the hip ran from one shoulder to her feet. Muffat followed that lovely profile, those glimpses of pink flesh sunk in a golden light, those silky curves in the reflections from the flames of the candles. He was remembering his former horror of woman, of the monster of Holy Scripture, lecherous, smelling like a wild animal. Nana was covered in fine hair, a reddish down turned her body into velvet, but in her thighs and rump, like those of a mare, in the fleshy slopes whose deep folds and furrows veiled her sex in a troubling shadow, there was something bestial. She was the golden beast, an unconscious force, the very scent of her could bring the world to ruin. Muffat, obsessed, possessed, went on staring, to the point where, having closed his lids so as not to see it any more, the animal loomed out of the darkness again, bigger, terrifying, even more menacing. (p. 171)

Through Muffat and his religiosity, Zola satirizes the doctrines and practices of a religion that sees all sex as Sin, and a type of 'cloying piety' (p. 322) embodied in the Muffats' oily spiritual confidant, Théophile Venot.

However, it is not only through the eyes of Muffat and his fantasies that we see Nana as the deadly sexual beast. The narrator, too, adopts this view of the heroine as the text progresses. There are moments when the narrator portrays Nana as ‘a good-natured sort of girl’ (p. 232), but this generally occurs in scenes dominated by direct discourse, when Nana herself is talking. Increasingly, however, the narrator himself, when viewing the heroine, projects on to her fears similar to those of his male characters. ‘Zola takes fright at his own creation,’ suggests Peter Brooks.[16] Symptomatically, the third-person narration in the penultimate chapter (Chapter 13), when Nana reaches the height of her destructive powers, becomes fast and feverish. Representation of the mythic Nana, the man-eater, reaches a dizzy, hyperbolic pitch, as if she breaks free of all narratorial control. Her erotic body, the centre of the novel, becomes a vortex swallowing up men and their fortunes:

> In her house, it was like the spark from a forge. Her constant desire for one thing or another flamed into being, the least breath from her lips and gold turned to dust and was swept away every hour in the wind. Never had people seen such a crazy passion for spending money. The house seemed to be built over a bottomless pit, men and their possessions, their bodies, even their names were sucked into it without leaving so much as a speck of dust behind. (p. 326)

Nana squanders money indiscriminately. Her capriciousness knows no bounds. She takes pleasure in destroying her lovers’ gifts. The wastefulness of her household becomes surreal, a kind of gigantic haemorrhage. She allows the servants, presided over by the scheming Zoë, to siphon off her fortune, while creditors clamour over unpaid bills.[17] One after the other, her lovers are devoured. Finally she turns to Fauchery’s cousin La Faloise, whose fortune is in land:

> the tall grass which came up to the cows’ bellies, it all disappeared, swallowed up in the abyss. And even a watercourse, a stone quarry, and three windmills had vanished down the hole. Nana passed like an invading army, like a cloud of locusts blazing through a province and stripping it. She scorched the earth wherever she put her dainty foot. (p. 348)

At the end of the chapter, she stands alone, surrounded so to speak by the corpses of her victims: ‘She stood alone in the midst of the piles of riches in her house with a whole host of men laid low at her feet. Like those monsters of old whose fearsome domains were littered in bones, she was treading on skulls’ (p. 361)

The image of the forge in the quotation above (p. xxi) suggests a mechanism like a combustion engine. As Peter Brooks has pointed out, Nana's sexuality, associated with heat and explosive energy, is the motor force of the narrative, functioning like the locomotive, the coal mine, the stock market, and the department store dramatized in Zola's other novels.[18] Her frenzied consumption generates ever greater amounts of money, as her appetite for material goods increases. *Nana*, wrote Roland Barthes, is 'an epic book', not only because of the 'admirable excess' of its descriptions but also because of 'the very tempo of the work', its vertiginous rhythm: 'as the rot sets in, as the men are more and more tenaciously held in Nana's sway, the narrative gains speed and months at the end of the story are like minutes at the beginning'.[19] The novel hurtles towards its end. The faster the engine goes, the more fuel it needs; it is fated to overheat, run out of control, and crash.

Just as Nana appears to break free of narratorial control, so the social and political symbolism she embodies becomes unstable. The idea of Nana as avenging angel of the working class, reflected in the image of a disease-carrying fly, is reintroduced at the end of Chapter 13:

> Her work of ruin and death was over, the fly had flown off the dung heap of the faubourgs, bringing with it the ferment of social decay, and poisoning these men simply by alighting on them. It was good, it was just, she had avenged her own people, the beggars and the outcasts. And while sex rose triumphant in her and shone upon her prostrate victims like a rising sun lighting up a field of carnage, she remained as unconscious of it as a proud animal, ignorant of what she had wrought, always kind at heart. (p. 362)

But as Bill Overton comments, 'Zola's portrayal of monstrous female sexuality in his heroine is so compulsive and excessive that it threatens to overwhelm the novel's entire critique of Empire society.'[20] In the final chapter, describing Nana's death from smallpox as the chanting crowds surge past outside, the narrator seems to attribute the coming disaster not so much to the corruption of the Second Empire as to rampant female sexuality per se—something even more dreadful, it seems to be suggested, than the social wrongs Nana set out to avenge.

[1] Zola fudges some dates in order to fit the events of the novel within the frame of the Second Empire. Nana's date of birth is stated to be 1852, but he makes her 18 when she appears onstage in the year of the Exposition Universelle (1867).

[2] On the theme of prostitution in nineteenth-century French literature, see Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Bernheimer's entry 'Prostitution in the Novel', in Denis Hollier (ed.), *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 780–5.

[3] Rupert Christiansen, *Paris Babylon: Grandeur, Decadence and Revolution 1869–1875* (1994; London: Pimlico, 2003), 83.

[4] Quoted by T. J. Clark in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984; rev. edn 1999), 105 (translation modified). On the fear of invasion by unregistered prostitutes in the later 1860s and 1870s, see Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 17–29 and 128–48.

[5] Such an establishment—a family-owned business in the town of Chartres—features in Zola's novel *Earth/La Terre* (1887).

[6] For an engaging and informative study of the lives of four of these courtesans—Marie Duplessis, Cora Pearl, La Païva (Thérèse Lachmann), and La Présidente (Apollonie Sabatier)—see Virginia Rounding, *Grandes Horizontales* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

[7] Rounding, *Grandes Horizontales*, 3–4. The major theme of David Baguley's excellent study of Napoleon III, *Napoleon III and His Regime: An Extravaganza* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), is the Emperor's assiduous manufacture of his public image.

[8] Rounding, *Grandes Horizontales*, 2.

[9] Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 108, 111.

[10] Baguley, *Napoleon III and His Regime*, 307.

[11] Valerie Minogue, '*Nana*: The World, the Flesh and the Devil', in Brian Nelson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Zola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 121–36 (at 126).

[12] Ilona Chessid, *Thresholds of Desire: Authority and Transgression in the* Rougon-Macquart (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 71.

[13] Chessid, *Thresholds of Desire*, 71.

[14] David Baguley, 'Zola, the Novelist(s)', in Robert Lethbridge and Terry Keefe (eds), *Zola and the Craft of Fiction* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), 15–27 (at 22).

[15] Gustave Flaubert, letter to Zola, 15 Feb. 1880.

[16] Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 119.

[17] It is this contempt for money, argues Rita Felski, that 'embodies her greatest offense against a traditional bourgeois ethos of respect for prosperity and the accumulation of wealth': Felski, 'The All-Consuming Woman', in *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 74-9 (at 78).

[18] See Brooks, *Realist Vision*, ch. 7: 'Zola's Combustion Chamber', 113-29.

[19] Roland Barthes, 'The Man-Eater', in David Baguley (ed.), *Critical Essays on Émile Zola* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 90-3 (at 90).

[20] Bill Overton, *Fictions of Female Adultery, 1684-1890: Theories and Circumtexts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 171.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

FOR my translation I used the Folio Classique text, edited by Henri Mitterand (Éditions Gallimard, 1977). *Nana* was first translated into English in 1884 by Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, the son of Zola's publisher in Britain who scandalized the Victorian public and suffered for it. Thereafter the chief translators were: Victor Plarr (Lutetian Society, 1895); Joseph Keating (Cecil Palmer, 1926); Charles Duff (William Heinemann, 1953); Lowell Blair (Bantam Books, 1964); George Holden (Penguin, 1972); Douglas Parmée (OUP, 1992). I consulted these last two for my own translation, and looked—with interest!—at Vizetelly, whose dialogue, although peppered with expressions that now strike us as comically dated, is very lively and true to the original. Most up-to-the-minute colloquial speech lasts a very short time indeed, and a translator employing it risks reducing the liveliness of the original text. I tried for a language that would get across both the tone and the modernity of Zola's novel.

So far as I know, I am the first woman to translate *Nana*. It is a book which by its radical truthfulness still has the power to shock. Zola depicts a society 'governed' by men and far gone in folly, corruption, and injustice. Nana, herself a victim, hurries them on to perdition.

My thanks go to Brian Nelson for his introduction and encouraging comments; to Judith Luna for her meticulous proofreading; to my husband, David Constantine, for his careful reading of the text and his helpful suggestions; and to Rowena Anketell, copy-editor extraordinary.

H.C.

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NANA was serialized in *Le Voltaire* from 16 October 1879 to 5 February 1880 and published in volume form by Charpentier in February 1880. It was an enormous *succès de scandale.* More than 80,000 copies were sold in the year 1880 alone. Much of the novel's fascination resided, no doubt, in its sexual candour. Predictably, *bien-pensant* establishment critics were outraged. The novel was compared to 'a sewer' and 'a cesspool'. It was 'a quadruped novel'. But the public loved it. During Zola's lifetime it outsold all his novels except *La Débâcle* (1892).

Nana is included in volume ii of Henri Mitterand's superb scholarly edition of *Les Rougon-Macquart* in the 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1960–7), in volume ix of the Nouveau Monde edition of the *Œuvres complètes*, 21 vols (Paris, 2002–10), and in volume iii of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. Colette Becker et al., 5 vols (Paris: Robert Laffont, Collection Bouquins, 1992–3). Colette Becker has produced an excellent scholarly edition of the novel in the Classiques Garnier series (1994). Paperback editions exist in the following popular collections: Folio, ed. Henri Mitterand; Les Classiques de Poche, preface by Auguste Dezalay; GF Flammarion, ed. Marie-Ange Fougère.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF ÉMILE ZOLA

1840 (2 April) Born in Paris, the only child of Francesco Zola (b. 1795), an Italian engineer, and Émilie, née Aubert (b. 1819), the daughter of a glazier. The naturalist novelist was later proud that ‘zolla’ in Italian means ‘clod of earth’

1843 Family moves to Aix-en-Provence

1847 (27 March) Death of father from pneumonia following a chill caught while supervising work on his scheme to supply Aix-en-Provence with drinking water

1852–8 Boarder at the Collège Bourbon at Aix. Friendship with Baptistin Baille and Paul Cézanne. Zola, not Cézanne, wins the school prize for drawing

1858 (February) Leaves Aix to settle in Paris with his mother (who had preceded him in December). Offered a place and bursary at the Lycée Saint-Louis. (November) Falls ill with ‘brain fever’ (typhoid) and convalescence is slow

1859 Fails his *baccalauréat* twice

1860 (Spring) Is found employment as a copy-clerk but abandons it after two months, preferring to eke out an existence as an impecunious writer in the Latin Quarter of Paris

1861 Cézanne follows Zola to Paris, where he meets Camille Pissarro, fails the entrance examination to the École des Beaux-Arts, and returns to Aix in September

1862 (February) Taken on by Hachette, the well-known publishing house, at first in the dispatch office and subsequently as head of the publicity department. (31 October) Naturalized as a French citizen. Cézanne returns to Paris and stays with Zola

1863 (31 January) First literary article published. (1 May) Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* exhibited at the Salon des Refusés, which Zola visits with Cézanne

1864 (October) *Tales for Ninon*

1865 *Claude’s Confession*. A *succès de scandale* thanks to its bedroom scenes. Meets future wife Alexandrine-Gabrielle Meley (b. 1839), the illegitimate daughter of teenage parents who soon separated; Alexandrine’s mother died in September 1849

1866 Resigns his position at Hachette (salary: 200 francs a month) and becomes a literary critic on the recently launched daily *L’Événement* (salary: 500 francs a month). Self-styled ‘humble disciple’ of Hippolyte Taine. Writes a series of provocative articles condemning the official Salon Selection Committee, expressing reservations about Courbet, and praising Manet and Monet. Begins to frequent the Café Guerbois in the Batignolles quarter of Paris, the meeting-place of the future Impressionists. Antoine Guillemet takes Zola to meet Manet. Summer months spent with Cézanne at Bennecourt on the Seine. (15 November) *L’Événement* suppressed by the authorities

1867 (November) *Thérèse Raquin*

1868 (April) Preface to second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*. (May) Manet’s portrait of Zola exhibited at the Salon. (December) *Madeleine Férat*. Begins to plan for the Rougon-Macquart series of novels

1868–70 Working as journalist for a number of different newspapers

1870 (31 May) Marries Alexandrine in a registry office. (September) Moves temporarily to Marseilles because of the Franco-Prussian War

1871 Political reporter for *La Cloche* (in Paris) and *Le Sémaphore de Marseille*. (March) Returns to Paris. (October) Publishes *The Fortune of the Rougons*, the first of the twenty novels making up the Rougon-Macquart series

1872 *The Kill*

1873 (April) *The Belly of Paris*

1874 (May) *The Conquest of Plassans*. First independent Impressionist exhibition. (November) *Further Tales for Ninon*

1875 Begins to contribute articles to the Russian newspaper *Vestnik Evropy* (*European Herald*). (April) *The Sin of Abbé Mouret*

1876 (February) *His Excellency Eugène Rougon*. Second Impressionist exhibition

1877 (February) *L'Assommoir*

1878 Buys a house at Médan on the Seine, 40 kilometres west of Paris. (June) *A Love Story* (*Une page d'amour*)

1880 (March) *Nana*. (May) *Les Soirées de Médan* (an anthology of short stories by Zola and some of his naturalist 'disciples', including Maupassant). (8 May) Death of Flaubert. (September) First of a series of articles for *Le Figaro*. (17 October) Death of his mother. (December) *The Experimental Novel*

1882 (April) *Pot Luck* (*Pot-Bouille*). (3 September) Death of Turgenev

1883 (13 February) Death of Wagner. (March) *The Ladies' Paradise* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*). (30 April) Death of Manet

1884 (March) *The Bright Side of Life* (*La Joie de vivre*). Preface to catalogue of Manet exhibition

1885 (March) *Germinal*. (12 May) Begins writing *The Masterpiece (L'Œuvre*). (22 May) Death of Victor Hugo. (23 December) First instalment of *The Masterpiece* appears in *Le Gil Blas*

1886 (27 March) Final instalment of *The Masterpiece*, which is published in book form in April

1887 (18 August) Denounced as an onanistic pornographer in the *Manifesto of the Five* in *Le Figaro*. (November) *Earth*

1888 (October) *The Dream*. Jeanne Rozerot becomes his mistress

1889 (20 September) Birth of Denise, daughter of Zola and Jeanne

1890 (March) *La Bête humaine*

1891 (March) *Money*. (April) Elected President of the Société des Gens de Lettres. (25 September) Birth of Jacques, son of Zola and Jeanne

1892 (June) *La Débâcle*

1893 (July) *Doctor Pascal*, the last of the Rougon-Macquart novels. Fêted on visit to London

1894 (August) *Lourdes*, the first novel of the trilogy *Three Cities*. (22 December) Dreyfus found guilty by a court martial

1896 (May) *Rome*

1898 (13 January) ‘J’accuse’, his article in defence of Dreyfus, published in *L’Aurore*. (21 February) Found guilty of libelling the Minister of War and given the maximum sentence of one year’s imprisonment and a fine of 3,000 francs. Appeal for retrial granted on a technicality. (March) *Paris*. (23 May) Retrial delayed. (18 July) Leaves for England instead of attending court

1899 (4 June) Returns to France. (October) *Fecundity*, the first of his *Four Gospels*

1901 (May) *Toil*, the second ‘Gospel’

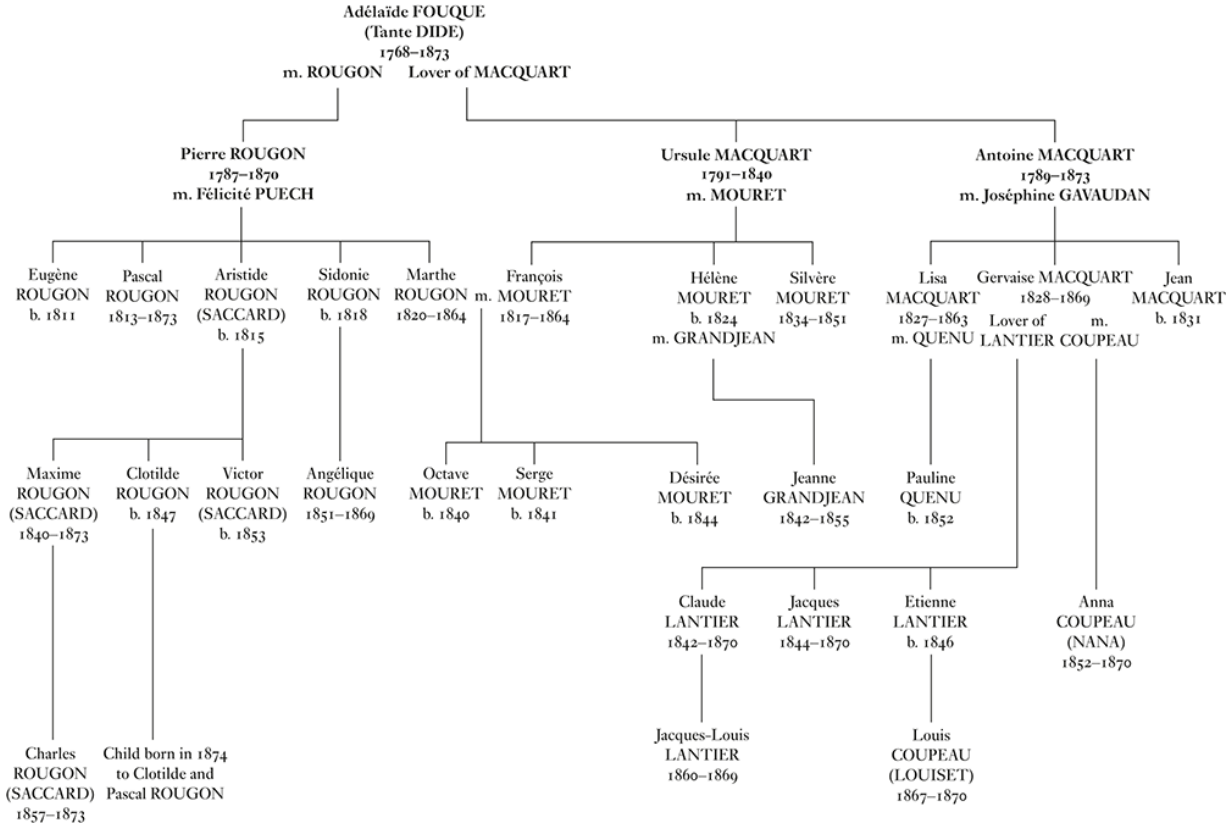
1902 (29 September) Dies of fumes from his bedroom fire, the chimney having been capped either by accident or anti-Dreyfusard design. Wife survives. (5 October) Public funeral

1903 (March) *Truth*, the third ‘Gospel’, published posthumously. *Justice* was to be the fourth

1908 (4 June) Remains transferred to the Panthéon

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FAMILY TREE OF THE ROUGON-MACQUART



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NANA

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CHAPTER 1

At nine o'clock, the Théâtre des Variétés* was still almost empty. A few stray people in the dress circle and stalls, ensconced in deep crimson plush velvet, waited in the dim half-glow of the lamps. The dark curtain, in shadow, was like a big red stain. There was no sound from the stage, from the unlit footlights, from the stands of the musicians now disbanded. Only up in the gods, around the dome of the ceiling where naked women and infants soared across a firmament coloured green by the gaslight, came the constant hubbub of chatter and laughter from rows of capped and bonneted heads behind the wide, gilt-edged bays. From time to time an attendant could be seen, busy, tickets in her hand, ushering ladies and gentlemen into their seats, the men in suits, the women slim and willowy, looking unhurriedly around them as they sat down.

Two young men appeared at the back of the stalls. They stood there, surveying the scene.

'What did I tell you, Hector?' the older one exclaimed. He was tall and had a small black moustache. 'We're too early. You could just as well have let me finish my cigar.'

An usherette came by.

'Ah, Monsieur Fauchery,' she said in a familiar tone, 'it won't be starting for another half-hour.'

'Then why do they advertise it as starting at nine?' Hector muttered, a frown on his long thin face. 'And besides, Clarisse, who's in the show, swore to me this very morning that it started at eight o'clock sharp.'

They were silent for a moment, peering up at the boxes veiled in shadow. But the green wallpaper made them look even darker. The ground-floor boxes below the dress circle disappeared in the total darkness. In the dress-circle boxes there was just one large lady, slumped over the plush velvet rail. To right and left between the tall pillars, the stage boxes draped in long-fringed valances remained empty. The white and gold auditorium, with its embellishments of a delicate green, was vanishing, as though in a fine cloud of dust behind the short flames of the crystal chandelier.

'Did you manage to get your box for Lucy?' Hector enquired.

‘Yes,’ replied the other man. ‘But not without difficulty. Oh, there’s no danger Lucy will arrive too early!’

Suppressing a little yawn, he added after a pause:

‘You’re lucky to see this as your first premiere… *La Blonde Vénus* will be the event of the year. People have been talking about it for the last six months. My dear fellow, the music! Su-perb! Bordenave, who knows about these things, has kept it back to time with the Exhibition.’*

Hector listened reverentially.

‘And what about this new star, Nana, who is going to play Venus, do you know her?’ he enquired.

‘Oh no, not you as well!’ cried Fauchery, throwing up his hands. ‘People have been going on to me about Nana all morning. I’ve met more than a score of people and it was “Nana” from this one and “Nana” from that. How should I know! Am I supposed to know all the women in Paris! Nana is Bordenave’s discovery. A right little trollop, no doubt!’

He calmed down. But the emptiness of the room, the dimness of the chandelier, the churchlike silence full of whisperings and doors banging was getting on his nerves.

‘No,’ he said suddenly. ‘We look like old men sitting here. I’m going out… Perhaps we’ll see Bordenave in the foyer. He’ll put us in the picture.’

Down in the large foyer with its marble floor where the ticket entrance was situated, people were beginning to arrive. Through the three open doors you could see the teeming life on the bustling, brightly lit boulevards this beautiful April night. Coaches rattled to an abrupt halt, carriage doors slammed shut, and little groups of people arrived, stopping at the ticket barrier, ascending the wide staircase at the back of the foyer, the women slowly, their skirts swinging as they went. In the glare of the gaslight in the bare white room, where a flimsy cardboard structure in the Empire style depicted the colonnades of a temple, tall yellow posters with the word NANA in huge black letters were luridly displayed. Gentlemen stopped to read them, their attention caught as they passed; others stood and chatted, blocking the doorways. Near the ticket office a stout man with a broad, shaven face was giving short shrift to people persisting in their quest for tickets.

‘There’s Bordenave,’ said Fauchery as he went downstairs.

But the director had already seen them.

‘So you’ve been telling me cock and bull stories!’ he called. ‘That’s not very nice! I opened my *Figaro** this morning—nothing there!’

‘Patience, patience!’ Fauchery answered. ‘I’ve got to get to know your Nana, before I say anything about her… In any case, I didn’t promise.’

Then, to change the subject, he introduced his cousin, Monsieur Hector de La Faloise, a young man who had come to finish his education in Paris. The director weighed him up with one glance. But Hector was gazing at him, obviously impressed. So this was Bordenave, the showman who searched out women and treated them like slaves, whose head was always buzzing with some new publicity stunt, a shouting, spitting, thigh-slapping cynic with the mentality of a sergeant major! Hector felt he ought to say something pleasant.

‘Your theatre…’ he piped up.

But coolly, Bordenave stopped him with a vulgar expression, like a man who likes to speak plainly.

‘You mean my bordello.’

At this, Fauchery gave an approving chuckle, while La Faloise stood there, his compliment stuck in his throat, the wind taken out of his sails, but trying to look as if he relished the word. The director had rushed over to shake hands with a drama critic, whose articles carried some weight. When he came back, La Faloise was recovering his aplomb. He was afraid of being thought provincial if he looked too shocked.

‘I hear,’ he began again, wanting to make some remark at any event, ‘that Nana has a delightful voice.’

‘Nana!’ exclaimed the director, with a shrug. ‘Voice like a stuck pig.’

The young man hastened to add: ‘Well anyway, she’s an outstanding actress.’

‘Nana! That great lump! She hasn’t the faintest idea what to do with her hands and feet.’

La Faloise reddened a little. He didn’t understand. He stuttered:

‘I wouldn’t have missed tonight’s premiere for anything. I knew your theatre…’

‘My bordello, you mean,’ Bordenave corrected him again, with the cool insistence of a man sure of his subject.

Meanwhile Fauchery was quietly watching the women arrive. He came to his cousin’s aid when he saw how discomfited he was, not knowing

whether to laugh or get angry.

‘Be nice to Bordenave, and call his theatre whatever he asks, if that amuses him… And you, my dear sir, don’t keep us guessing. If this Nana of yours can’t sing or act, it will be a flop and that’s all there is to it. That’s what I was afraid of anyway.’

‘A flop? A flop?’ the director shouted, going purple with rage. ‘Does a woman need to be able to sing and act? Don’t be so silly, my dear fellow… Nana has something else, for heaven’s sake, and something that makes all the other stuff superfluous. I’ve got a nose for that sort of thing, she’s got loads of it, or call me a fool. You’ll see, you’ll see, she’s only got to walk out on stage, they’ll all have their tongues hanging out.’

He waved his large hands which trembled with emotion. And then, calming down again, he grunted to himself under his breath:

‘Oh yes, she’ll go far, by God, she’ll go far… That skin! That skin!’

Then, as Fauchery was questioning him, he condescended to give details, using coarse expressions that shocked Hector de La Faloise. He’d got to *know* Nana and he wanted to launch her career. As luck would have it, he was looking for a Venus just then. He did not saddle himself with a woman for long; he preferred to place her on the public stage without delay. But he was in the devil of a mess, the arrival of this gorgeous girl was causing a real upset. Rose Mignon, his star, a fine actress with a beautiful singing voice, was furious, she suspected a rival, and was threatening every day to leave him in the lurch. And as for the poster, ye gods, what a to-do! In the end he had decided to put up the names of both actresses in letters of equal size. He mustn’t annoy her. When one of his ‘little ladies’, as he called them, Simonne or Clarisse, didn’t toe the line, he gave them a kick up the backside. Otherwise life was impossible. He knew what they were worth, the little trollops, it was he who put them on the market!

‘By the way,’ he went on, changing the subject, ‘Mignon and Steiner. Joined at the hip! You know Steiner is beginning to get heartily sick of Rose, and her husband doesn’t let him out of his sight, in case he does a bunk.’

The row of gaslights blazing on the cornice outside the theatre flooded the pavement with light. Two small trees of a vivid green stood out quite clearly. An advertising column was so brightly lit, you could read the posters on it as if it were the middle of the day; and beyond, in the dense

darkness of the boulevard, you could see specks of light among the indistinct mass of humanity constantly on the move. Many men did not come in straight away, but stayed outside chatting while they finished their cigars in the glare of the gaslight, which turned them a ghastly white and cast their short black shadows on to the pavement.

Mignon, a very tall, thickset man, with the square head of a strongman from some fairground, elbowed his way through the groups, with the banker Steiner in tow, a small, already rather portly fellow, his round face framed by a greying beard.

‘You know her,’ said Bordenave to the banker, ‘you met her yesterday in my office.’

‘So that was her!’ cried Steiner. ‘I thought it must be. Only I was going out just as she was coming in, so I scarcely got a glimpse of her.’

Mignon was listening, eyes cast down, nervously twisting a huge diamond round and round his finger. He realized they were talking about Nana. Then, as Bordenave was painting a portrait of his rising star, which made the banker’s eyes glint, he finally broke in to the conversation.

‘That’s quite enough, my dear fellow, she’s a tart. The public will show her the door soon enough… Steiner, old man, you realize my wife is waiting for you in the dressing room.’

He made to bear him off. But Steiner did not want to leave Bordenave. In front of them, a queue of people was crowding round the barrier, a hubbub of voices rose, and the name ‘Nana’ rang out, the two syllables melodious and lively. The men who stood before the posters were spelling it out aloud. Others threw it out in an enquiring voice *en passant*, while the women, smiling anxiously, said it softly, over and over again in a surprised tone. Nobody knew this Nana. Where had she sprung from? Rumours spread, jokes were whispered from one to another. It was a caress, a familiar pet name everyone liked to say. Just to utter the word enlivened the crowd and put them in a jolly mood. Everyone was burning with curiosity, a violent, passionate fever so typical of Parisians. They were desperate to see Nana. One lady had the flounce on her dress torn off, a gentleman lost his hat.

‘Ah, too many questions!’ Bordenave shouted to a score of men besieging him. ‘You’ll see her… I’m going now, I’m needed elsewhere.’

He vanished, delighted that he had whetted his audience's appetite. Mignon shrugged, reminding Steiner that Rose was waiting to show him her costume for Act One.

'Look, there's Lucy over there getting out of her carriage,' said La Faloise to Fauchery.

It was indeed Lucy Stewart, a small unprepossessing woman of about forty, with a neck that was too long, a thin, drawn face, and thick lips, but so vivacious and graceful that she possessed a great deal of charm. She was bringing Caroline Héquet and her mother with her. Caroline had an aloof kind of beauty, her mother had a very dignified but strait-laced air about her.

'Come and sit with us, I've saved you a place,' she suggested to Fauchery.

'No no, certainly not! I wouldn't see a thing!' he replied. 'I've got an armchair seat, I prefer to be in the stalls.'

Lucy was annoyed. Did he not dare to be seen with her? Then, suddenly changing her tune, she leapt to another subject:

'Why didn't you tell me you knew Nana?'

'Nana! Never met her.'

'Is that the truth? People swear you've slept with her.'

But in front of them Mignon with his finger to his lips, made a sign to them to be quiet. And, in reply to a question from Lucy, he pointed out a young man going past and murmured:

'Nana's man of the moment.'

Everyone stared. He was nice-looking, Fauchery recognized him. It was Daguenet, a young man who had squandered three hundred thousand francs on women and who now dabbled at the Bourse* to pay them with gifts of flowers and take them out to dinner from time to time. Lucy thought he had nice eyes.

'Ah, here's Blanche!' she cried. 'She's the one who said you'd slept with Nana.'

Blanche de Sivry, a well-endowed blonde whose pretty face had grown somewhat flabbier, was arriving with a slim, very elegant, very distinguished gentleman.

'The Comte Xavier de Vandeuvres,' whispered Fauchery, for La Faloise's benefit.

The count exchanged a handshake with the journalist, while an animated discussion took place between Blanche and Lucy. They blocked the way with their full flounced skirts, the one blue, the other pink, and the name ‘Nana’ was so often and so shrill on their lips that everyone pricked up their ears. The Comte de Vandeuvres carried Blanche off. But now the word ‘Nana’ was echoing ever louder from the four corners of the foyer—it was a longing intensified by the waiting. Weren’t they ever going to start? Men took out their watches, latecomers jumped down from their carriages even before they pulled up, little groups left the pavement, and passers-by walked slowly across the now empty shaft of gaslight, craning their necks to peer inside the theatre. A street urchin who came by whistling, stopped in front of one of the posters on the door and shouted ‘Hey Nana!’ in a hoarse voice, and then swaggered off, shuffling along the pavement. A laugh rippled round the foyer. Some men, respectable men, repeated his words: ‘Nana, hey Nana!’ There was a crush, a dispute broke out at the ticket barrier, the noise grew louder because of the clamour of voices shouting for Nana, demanding Nana, one of those silly physical, brainless reactions that people have when they are all together in a crowd.

Above the noise, however, the bell for the entr’acte rang out. ‘The bell! The bell!’ they said to each other, and their voices reached as far as the boulevard. And it was a free-for-all, everybody wanting to get through, while more and more people came to man the ticket barrier. Worried, Mignon at last managed to rejoin Steiner, who had not gone to see Rose’s costume. At the first bell, La Faloise had elbowed his way through the crowd, dragging Fauchery along with him, so as not to miss the beginning. This haste on the part of the public annoyed Lucy Stewart. What vulgar people, pushing women like that! She stayed till last with Caroline Héquet and her mother. The foyer was empty. Outside, the constant roar of the boulevard could still be heard.

‘It’s not as if their plays were always so very entertaining!’ Lucy remarked as she went up the flight of stairs.

Inside the theatre Fauchery and La Faloise, standing in front of their seats, looked round again. Now the whole room was resplendent. The great crystal chandelier with its leaping gas flames rippled with pink and yellow lights, showering bright splinters from the proscenium arch to the pit. The glossy red velvet on the seats shimmered, while the gleaming golds were softened by the pale green ornamentation beneath the lurid paintings on the

ceiling. The raised footlights, in a sudden shaft of brilliance, lit up the curtain, whose heavy crimson drapery, rich as that of some fabulous palace, was in stark contrast to the shabby surrounds, where large cracks were visible beneath the gilt. It was already very warm. At their stands the musicians were tuning up, trilling on their flutes, making little sighing sounds on the horns, and a singing on the violins, all trailing off into the air over the ever louder clamour of voices. Everyone in the audience was talking, pressing one against the other, getting settled after beating a path to their seats. And the pushing and jostling in the corridors was so fierce that every door only reluctantly let through a seemingly continuous flood of people. People waved to others to come, dresses rustled, a procession of skirts and coiffures filed through, set off by the black of a suit or frock coat. But the rows of seats were gradually filling up. A brightly coloured dress made a splash, a pretty head bent over, revealing a chignon sparkling with jewels. In one of the boxes a patch of bare shoulder resembled white silk. Other women had settled down and were languidly fanning themselves, watching the crowds as they jostled their way into their seats, while young gentlemen stood in the stalls with their waistcoats wide open, gardenias in their buttonholes, scanning the scene with opera glasses held between the fingertips of their gloved hands.

The two cousins looked around to see who they knew. Mignon and Steiner were together in a ground-floor box side by side, leaning on the velvet-covered rail. Blanche de Sivry appeared to be occupying a stage box on the ground floor all on her own. But La Faloise was studying Daguenet in particular; he had a seat in the stalls, two rows in front of his own. Next to him was a very young man, seventeen at most, a truanting schoolboy perhaps, with lovely wide-open eyes like a cherub. When he saw him, it brought a smile to Fauchery’s face.

‘Who’s that lady over there in the circle?’ La Faloise asked suddenly. ‘The one sitting next to a girl in blue.’

He pointed to a large woman in a tight corset, a blonde whose hair had gone white and was now dyed yellow, and whose round, rouged face was puffed out under a shower of childish ringlets.

‘That’s Gaga,’ answered Fauchery without further explanation.

And as his cousin seemed bewildered by the name, he added:

‘Don’t you know Gaga? She was all the rage during the first years of the reign of Louis-Philippe.* Nowadays she trails her daughter around with her

everywhere she goes.’

La Faloise did not even look at the girl. The sight of Gaga disturbed him, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. He thought she was quite attractive still, but didn’t dare say so.

Meanwhile the conductor had raised his baton and the musicians were launching into the overture. People were still coming in, the movement and the noise increased. Amongst this audience of first-nighters, it tended to be the same small intimate groups of friends who smilingly greeted each other. Regular behatted theatregoers, relaxed and very much at home, waved to one another. This was Paris, the Paris of letters, of finance, of pleasure; there were quite a few journalists, some writers, men from the Bourse, more women of doubtful rather than honest repute; a crowd that was extremely mixed, made up of every sort of person, ruined by every kind of vice, where the same fatigue and the same excitement were visible on every face. Fauchery, at his cousin’s questioning, showed him where the press and club boxes were, and then named the drama critics: a lean, desiccated man with thin, mean lips, and then in particular a fat one with a rather jolly face, leaning comfortably against the shoulder of his companion, a young ingénue, whom he was watching over in a tender, fatherly way.

But he broke off when he saw La Faloise wave to the people sitting in the box opposite. His surprise was evident.

‘What!’ he asked. ‘Do you know Comte Muffat de Beuville?’

‘Oh, I’ve known him for ages,’ Hector replied. ‘The Muffats have a place near ours. I often visit them… that’s his wife with him, and his father-in-law, the Marquis de Chouard.’

And out of vanity, pleased at his cousin’s astonishment, he provided further details: the marquis was a Councillor of State,* the count had just been appointed the Empress’s Chamberlain. Fauchery, who had taken up his opera glasses, studied the countess, a brunette with white skin, dimples, and beautiful black eyes.

‘You must introduce me in the interval,’ he said finally. ‘I have met the count before but I wouldn’t say no to an invitation to their Tuesday soirées.’

There were loud whispers of ‘Sshhh!’ from the upper galleries. The overture had begun but people were still coming in. These late arrivals forced whole rows of spectators to get to their feet, the doors of the boxes opened and shut, raised voices could be heard in altercations in the

corridors. And the noise of conversations continued, just like the chattering of a multitude of sparrows at evening. It was a confusion, a chaos of heads and waving arms, some people taking their seats and getting comfortable, others still wanting to remain standing in order to have a last look around them. From the shadowy depths of the stalls came the loud cry ‘Sit down!’ A shiver of anticipation had run through the audience: so finally they were going to see this famous Nana that Paris had been so obsessed with for the last week.

Meanwhile people gradually lowered their voices, and stopped talking, save for a few throaty remarks. And in the middle of this faint murmuring, as the last words died away, the orchestra broke into the merry strains of a waltz, with a cheeky, jolly rhythm. The audience, titillated, was smiling in anticipation. But the claque at the front of the stalls were applauding furiously. The curtain went up.

‘Oh look!’ La Faloise, still talking, remarked. ‘Lucy’s got a man with her.’

He was looking to the right of the dress circle where Caroline and Lucy were occupying the front seats in their box. Behind them you could see the earnest face of Caroline’s mother and in profile the face of a tall young man, with nice fair hair, immaculately turned out.

‘Well look,’ insisted La Faloise again, ‘there *is* a man with them.’

Fauchery decided to train his opera glasses on the front of the stage. But he immediately turned round.

‘Oh, it’s Labordette,’ he murmured, indifferently, as though the presence of this gentleman was natural and of concern to no one.

Behind them there were calls of ‘Hush!’ and they had to stop talking. Now the theatre suddenly fell silent, and rows of intent, erect heads from stalls to balcony focused on the stage. The first act of *La Blonde Vénus* was set on Mount Olympus, a cardboard Olympus with clouds in the wings, and with Jupiter’s throne on the right. First came Iris and Ganymede attended by a chorus of celestial servants, singing as they set out seats for the Council of the Gods. Again there were cheers from the claque; the rest of the audience waited, reserving their judgement. But La Faloise applauded Clarisse Besnus, one of Bordenave’s ‘little ladies’ who was playing Iris, clad in soft blue with a large rainbow-coloured scarf.

‘She has to take her chemise off before she puts her dress on,’ Bordenave told Fauchery, in a voice intended to be heard by those around him. ‘We tried it this morning… You could see her chemise below her arms and down her back.’

But a slight shiver ran round the theatre. Rose Mignon had just come on as Diana. Although she did not have either the face or figure for the part, being thin and dark, with the pert ugliness of a Parisian gamine, she was charming, as if she were the very parody of the character. The way she came on, complaining about Mars who was in the process of leaving her for Venus, and spoke her unbelievably stupid lines in a coy, demure fashion full of risqué *sous-entendres*, made the audience warm to her. Her husband and Steiner, sitting next to each other, laughed complaisantly and when Prullière, the actor who was so popular, appeared in the guise of a general, a Mars of la Courtille* decked out with a gigantic plume, trailing a sabre which reached up to his shoulder, the whole theatre erupted. He’d had enough of Diana. She was too high and mighty. Diana swore to watch him and take revenge. The duo ended with a farcical yodelling scene which Prullière carried off very well in the voice of a yowling tomcat. He was a young male star who was making his way in the theatre and was inordinately pleased with himself. He rolled his eyes like the exhibitionist he was, which provoked shrieks of laughter from the ladies in the boxes.

But then the enthusiasm of the audience began to wane again. They found the succeeding scenes boring. Old Bosc, a stupid Jupiter, with his head squashed under an immense crown, just about managed to raise a smile from the audience when he had a domestic quarrel with Juno about paying their cook. But the procession of the gods, Neptune, Pluto, Minerva and the others, almost ruined everything. The audience was growing impatient, a worrying murmur was slowly getting louder, spectators were becoming bored and looking round the auditorium. Lucy and Labordette were laughing together. The Comte de Vandeuvres was peering out from behind the well-endowed Blanche; Fauchery was examining the Muffats out of the corner of his eye, the count was looking very solemn as if he hadn’t understood what was going on, the countess was smiling vaguely and looking dreamily into the distance. But suddenly amid all this unease, the applause of the claque broke out with the regularity of a firing squad. All eyes were on the stage. Was it finally going to be Nana? This Nana was certainly keeping them waiting.

But it was a deputation of mortals that Ganymede and Iris led on to the stage, respectable bourgeois, cuckolds one and all, coming to complain about Venus to the ruler of the gods, that she was inflaming their wives with too much passion. The lines of the chorus, mournful and naïve, interspersed with telling silences, were a great hit with the audience. ‘The Chorus of Cuckolds’ went round the theatre; and this name stuck, they cried ‘Encore’. The chorus had funny faces, just like they were supposed to look, especially a fat man with a round face like a moon. Meanwhile Vulcan arrived, furious, asking for his wife who had been missing for three days. The chorus took up the refrain again, imploring Vulcan, god of cuckolds. This character, Vulcan, was played by Fontan, a comic actor with an inventive if rather crude talent, who had a ridiculous way of walking, staggering around like a village blacksmith, wearing a wig of bright red hair, his bare arms tattooed with hearts pierced by arrows. A woman’s voice could be heard saying very loudly: ‘Oh, how ugly he is!’ and everyone laughed and clapped.

The following scene was interminable. Jupiter was taking a very long time to assemble the council of the gods in order to submit his request on behalf of the cuckolds. And still there was no Nana! Were they keeping her till the final curtain then? In the end the audience were exasperated by having to wait so long. The murmuring began again.

‘It’s not looking good,’ said the radiant Mignon to Steiner. ‘There’ll be trouble, I bet!’

At that moment the clouds at the back of the stage parted and Venus appeared. Nana, a strapping great girl for her eighteen years in her white goddess tunic, her long fair hair hanging loose over her shoulders, went calmly and confidently down to the footlights, laughing to the audience. And she began her big aria:

‘When Venus walks in the evening…’

At the second line people were looking at each other in the theatre. Was this some kind of joke or risky experiment by Bordenave? Never had such a caterwauling been heard, so off-key. Her director was quite right, she sang like a stuck pig. She had no idea of how to move onstage either, she threw her hands out in front of her, her whole body undulating in a way people thought unsuitable and inappropriate. Cries of ‘Ooh! Ooh!’ were already coming from the stalls and cheap seats and they were starting to hiss, when

a young lad’s voice, just on the point of breaking, cried enthusiastically from the comfortable seats in the stalls:

‘*Très chic!*’

The whole audience stared. It was the angelic boy who had truanted from school, his beautiful eyes wide as saucers, his fair complexion inflamed at the sight of Nana. When he saw that everybody had turned round to look at him, he grew very red at having involuntarily spoken out loud. His neighbour Daguenet was studying him, smiling, the audience was laughing as though disarmed and no longer inclined to jeer, while the young gentlemen in white gloves, enthralled also by the sight of Nana’s curves, were clapping ecstatically.

‘Quite right! Excellent! Bravo!’

Meanwhile, when she saw them all laughing, Nana started to laugh too. Their gaiety redoubled. You had to admit this lovely girl was a delight. When she laughed, a fetching little dimple appeared on her chin. She waited, not in the least put out, but on the contrary, quite at home, having established an immediate rapport with her audience, as if she was herself saying, tongue-in-cheek, that of course she had no talent whatsoever but it was of no consequence, since she had *that extra something*. And after having made a sign to the leader of the orchestra which meant: ‘Let’s get going!’ she began the next couplet:

‘At midnight, Venus passes…’

Nana’s voice was still out of tune but now she was hitting just the right spot and causing a little thrill among the spectators. The smile, which had not left her face for a moment, lit up her small ruby mouth and made her wide light-blue eyes sparkle. At the occasional rather saucy line, she turned up her nose, her nostrils flared, and a flame spread over her cheeks. She carried on swaying around, since she didn’t know how to do anything else. And they no longer thought that was bad, quite the reverse; the men were training their opera glasses on her. As she was finishing the couplet, her voice gave way entirely and she realized she wasn’t ever going to be able to get to the end. So, without further ado, she thrust out her hips, showing her shapely curves under the thin tunic, bent backwards, and threw back her neck while holding out her arms. The applause burst forth. Immediately she turned, going upstage again, displaying the back of her neck to the audience, her red hair tumbling down like the hair of an animal. And the clapping grew ever more furious.

The act ended in a less exciting manner. Vulcan tried to slap Venus. The gods held a council and decided they would proceed to an enquiry on Earth before acceding to the request of the cuckolded husbands. It was then that Diana, coming across Venus and Mars whispering sweet nothings to one another, swore she would not take her eyes off them during the journey. There was also a scene where Cupid, played by a twelve-year-old sticking her fingers up her nose, replied to all the questions with ‘Yes, Maman… No, Maman’ in a whining voice. Then Jupiter, like a strict schoolmaster who was getting annoyed, shut Cupid up in a dark room and gave him the verb *aimer* to conjugate twenty times. They liked the final scene more, it was a chorus led brilliantly by the actors and the orchestra. Once the curtain came down, the claque tried to get them to come back on stage, but in vain, everyone was on their feet and making for the doors.

They stepped on one another’s feet, jostled each other, and eased themselves between the rows of seats, exchanging their impressions. The verdict was:

‘It’s idiotic.’

One critic said they would have to make quite a few cuts. The play itself was in any case not the most important thing. Mostly they talked about Nana. Fauchery and La Faloise, who had gone out, bumped into Steiner and Mignon in the corridor near the orchestra. It was very stuffy in that narrow, low-ceilinged passage, like a gallery in a mine, lit by gaslight. They stood for a minute at the bottom of the staircase on the right, protected by the curving handrail. The spectators in the cheap seats were tramping down very loudly in their heavy shoes, there was a stream of white ties, and an usherette did all she could to stop a chair on which she had piled clothes from being pushed over.

‘But I know her!’ cried Steiner as soon as he spied Fauchery. ‘I’m certain I’ve seen her somewhere… At the Casino,* I think, and she was so drunk they had to take her home.’

‘I can’t quite think where, either,’ the journalist replied. ‘But like you, I’m certain I’ve seen her somewhere before…’

He lowered his voice and added with a chuckle:

‘Perhaps at the Tricon woman’s!’

‘Goodness, yes, somewhere seedy,’ declared Mignon, seeming exasperated. ‘It’s disgusting that the public gives that sort of reception to

somebody like that, the first tart that comes along. Soon there won't be a single honest woman left in the theatre… I shall have to stop Rose acting before long.'

Fauchery couldn't hold back a smile. Meanwhile the big boots continued to clump down the stairs and a little man in a cap drawled:

'Oh là là, what a plump chicken! I could eat her up!'

In the corridor two young men with frizzed hair, very smartly turned out, with open collars, were having a discussion. One was saying over and over again: 'Disgusting, disgusting!' without giving any reason. The other was responding with: 'Marvellous, marvellous!' but also not inclined to say why he thought that.

La Faloise thought she was very good. He ventured the opinion, however, that she would be better if she could do something about her voice. Then Steiner, who was no longer listening, appeared to come to with a start. You had to wait and see. It was possible that the following acts would be a disaster. The public had been indulgent but they were definitely not won over yet. Mignon swore that the play was never going to end and as Fauchery and La Faloise were leaving to go up to the foyer, he caught hold of Steiner's arm, pressed against his shoulder, and whispered in his ear:

'You'll see my wife's costume, my dear boy, in the second act… It's absolutely *indecent*!'

Above in the foyer three crystal chandeliers were burning brightly. The two cousins hesitated a moment: through the wide-open glass doors they could spy a sea of heads continually moving in two constant currents right through the gallery from one end to the other. But they went in. Resisting all the pushing and shoving, five or six groups of men were talking very loudly and waving their arms about. The others were filing through, turning on their heels, tapping the parquet. To right and left between the marbled columns, on red plush seats, women, listless in the heat, sat wearily watching the stream of people go past. And behind them in the tall mirrors you could see their chignons. At the back, at the counter, a paunchy man was drinking a glass of fruit cordial.

But Fauchery had gone out on the balcony for a breath of air. La Faloise who was contemplating framed photos of the actresses, which alternated with the mirrors between the pillars, eventually followed him. The gas

lamps along the front of the theatre had just been extinguished. It was dark and cool on the balcony, and apparently empty. But in the darkness, leaning on the stone balustrade in the right-hand bay, smoking a cigarette with a glowing tip, was a young man. Fauchery saw that it was Daguenet. They shook hands.

‘So what are you doing here, old chap?’ asked the journalist. ‘Hiding away in dark corners, when you don’t usually ever leave the stalls on first nights.’

‘I’m smoking, as you see,’ Daguenet responded.

Then Fauchery, to put him on the spot, asked:

‘Well, what do you think of our rising star? In the corridors they don’t seem to think very much of her.’

‘Oh,’ muttered Daguenet, ‘that’s just men she’s turned down!’

And that was all he would say about Nana’s talents.

La Faloise was leaning over the balcony looking down at the boulevard. Opposite them, the windows of a hotel and a club were lit up. On the pavement a dark mass of customers were sitting at the tables of the Café de Madrid.* In spite of the late hour, there was a crush. People were strolling around, and continually emerging from the Passage Jouffroy.* There was such a long queue of cabs they had to wait a full five minutes before they could cross the street.

‘What a lot of people! What a noise!’ La Faloise said again. Paris was still a great surprise to him.

A protracted ringing of the bell was heard and the foyer emptied. People hurried through the corridors. The curtain had risen but groups were still coming in, past the irritated theatre-goers already seated. Everybody went back to their places, and looked alert and expectant again. The first thing La Faloise did was look at Gaga; but he was once more astonished to see the tall blond boy next to her, the one who had been in Lucy’s box before.

‘What’s that gentleman’s name, then?’ he enquired.

Fauchery couldn’t see who he meant.

‘Oh, that’s Labordette,’ he said after a while, with the same indifferent shrug.

The set in the second act came as a surprise. They were in a seedy bar, La Boule Noire,* out by the city walls where Mardi Gras was in full swing. Masked dancers sang a round and tapped their heels in time to the refrain.

This ignoble band, whose appearance was totally unexpected, put the audience in such good spirits that they encored the song. And then it was that the bevy of gods led astray by Iris, who was boasting quite mendaciously about her knowledge of the Earth, came to conduct their investigation. In order to remain anonymous they were in disguise. Jupiter came on as King Dagobert* in a huge tin crown with his pants on back to front. Phoebus appeared as the Postilion of Longjumeau* and Minerva was a nurse from Normandy. Mars, dressed extravagantly as a Swiss admiral, was greeted by hoots of delight. But they broke into scandalized laughter when they saw Neptune clad only in a chemise, with a high puff cap on his head, kiss-curls stuck to his temples, slouching along in his slippers and saying huskily: ‘So what! When you are a handsome man, you can’t help them falling in love with you.’ There were ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ and the ladies raised their fans a little. Lucy in her box was laughing so loudly that Caroline Héquet gave her a little tap with her fan to make her be quiet.

From then on, the play was saved and promised to be a real hit. They were absolutely delighted by this carnival of the gods, where Olympus was dragged through the mud, and the religion and poetry of a whole civilization made fun of. The literary world who attended first nights was starting to revel in the irreverence of it all. They were trampling on legends, smashing ancient icons. Jupiter was a buffoon, Mars was slightly mad. Royalty became a farce and the army a big joke. When Jupiter suddenly fell in love with a little laundry girl and started to execute a wild cancan, Simonne, who was in the role of the laundry girl, kicked up her legs at the ruler of the gods, calling him ‘My big daddy’ and the theatre rocked with uncontrollable laughter. While the dance was going on, Phoebus was buying Minerva bowls of mulled wine and Neptune was enthroned amongst seven or eight women who were feeding him with cakes. The audience understood the allusions, they contributed their own obscenities; inoffensive words were given a double meaning by the interjections from the stalls. The theatre-going public had not been allowed to indulge in such foolishness or disrespect for a long while. They relaxed.

Meanwhile, in the midst of this pantomime, the action continued. Vulcan, a smart young man dressed all in yellow, with yellow gloves, a monocle fixed to his eye, was still running after Venus, who eventually turned up dressed as a fishwife with a kerchief round her head, her bosom bulging and covered in gold jewellery. Nana was so white and plump and so

perfectly suited this character with her ample hips and full face that she instantly won over the whole theatre. They forgot all about Rose Mignon, the delightful Bébé with the headband of willow and short muslin dress, who had just been sighing and complaining winningly on behalf of Diana. This other one, this big girl who kept slapping her thighs and cackling like a hen, brought with her the aura of life, the irresistible power of womanhood, and the public were high on it. From this second act on, she got away with whatever she wanted: moving badly on stage, singing out of tune, forgetting her lines. She only had to turn round and laugh to raise a cheer. One particular movement of her hips, and a warmth, an excitement ascended from the stalls through all the rows of the circle to the gods. So when she led the whole band, it was a triumphant success. She was quite at home in the role of Venus, hands on hips, like a street girl in the gutter. And the accompaniment seemed to be just made for her common voice, like the piping music of the fairground at Saint-Cloud, with the wheezing of the clarinet and the squeaking of the piccolo.

Two pieces got encores. The waltz from the overture, that music with the jaunty little rhythm from before, bore the gods away. Juno, in the role of a farmer’s wife, was pinching Jupiter and his laundress and giving him a clip round the ear. Diana, coming across Venus arranging a rendezvous with Mars, rushed to tell Vulcan the time and place, and he cried: ‘I have a plan.’ The rest was rather obscure. The enquiry ended in a final *galop* after which Jupiter, out of breath and in a sweat without his crown, declared that the little ladies on earth were delightful and men were to blame for everything.

The curtain fell and over all the cheering they shouted for everyone to come onstage:

‘The cast! The cast!’

Then the curtain went up again, the actors reappeared holding hands. In the middle were Nana and Rose Mignon, side by side, taking a bow. There was general applause and the claque shouted approval. Then little by little the theatre half emptied.

‘I must go and say hello to Comtesse Muffat,’ La Faloise said.

‘That’s right, introduce me,’ answered Fauchery. ‘We’ll go down together.’

But it wasn’t easy to get to the circle boxes. There was a crush in the passage. You had to make yourself very small, squeeze through, elbowing

your way forward. Leaning against a copper lamp in which a gas flame was burning, the stout theatre critic, surrounded by an attentive circle of people, was giving his opinion. People muttered his name to each other as they passed. He had been laughing throughout the whole act, that was the word going round. Yet now he was being very critical, talking about good taste and morality. A bit further on, the critic with the thin lips was full of praise, but his words had a nasty aftertaste, like milk which has turned sour.

Fauchery was looking through the round bays in the doors of each box. But the Comte de Vandeuvres stopped him and questioned him. And when he was told that the two cousins were going to pay their respects to Muffat, he pointed them in the direction of box number seven, from which he had just emerged. Then, leaning towards the journalist:

‘Tell me, old man, this Nana—it’s definitely her we saw one evening at the corner of the Rue de Provence…’*

‘Yes, by Jove, you’re right!’ cried Fauchery. ‘I was just saying I’d seen her somewhere before!’

La Faloise introduced his cousin to Comte Muffat de Beuville, who was very distant with him. But at the name Fauchery, the countess looked up and discreetly complimented the writer on his articles in the *Figaro*. Leaning over the velvet rail, she described an elegant half-turn with her shoulders. They chatted for a moment, the conversation got round to the Universal Exhibition.*

‘It will be wonderful,’ the count declared, his square face with its regular features had a kind of formal solemnity. ‘I visited the Champ-de-Mars today… I was amazed!’

‘They are certain it won’t be ready on time,’ La Faloise put in hesitantly. ‘It’s rather a mess.’

But the count interrupted him sternly:

‘It will be ready… It is the Emperor’s wish.’

Fauchery told a funny story about how he had almost been shut in the aquarium one day when it was still under construction, when he had gone there to gather some material for an article. The countess was smiling. She looked towards the theatre from time to time, raising one of her white-gloved arms, fanning herself languidly. The theatre, now almost empty, seemed to be dozing. A few gentlemen in the stalls had unfolded their newspapers. Women were enjoying the company, very much at ease, as if

they were at home. All you could hear was some polite whispering under the chandelier whose brightness was dimming a little in the fine dust dislodged by the shifting of people in the interval. At the exits crowds of men were trying to peer at the women still seated. And they remained standing there for a minute or two, looking at them, with their big white heart-shaped shirt fronts visible.

‘We shall expect you next Tuesday then,’ said the countess to La Faloise.

She invited Fauchery, who bowed in acknowledgement. There was no mention of the play, Nana’s name wasn’t uttered. The count still had such an air of icy dignity that you would have thought he was at some session of the Legislative Body. He simply said, by way of explanation for their presence, that his father-in-law was fond of the theatre. The door to the box must have remained open, the elderly Marquis de Chouard who had gone out in order to vacate his seat for the visitors, drew himself up to his full height, his flabby face looking pasty white beneath a wide-brimmed hat as he peered at the women who were going past with his blurry eyes.

As soon as the countess had issued her invitation, Fauchery took his leave, feeling it would not be appropriate to talk about the play. La Faloise was last to leave the box. In the stage box of the Comte de Vandeuvres he had just caught sight of the blond Labordette, ensconced and conversing at close quarters with Blanche de Sivry.

‘Oh,’ he said as soon as he was with his cousin again, ‘so this Labordette knows all the women? He’s with Blanche now.’

‘Well naturally, he knows them all,’ Fauchery answered calmly. ‘Where have you been all this time, my dear boy?’

It was a bit emptier in the corridor. Fauchery was about to go down when Lucy Stewart called him over. She was right at the back, outside the door of the box. It was roasting inside, she said. And she was taking up the whole width of the corridor along with Caroline Héquet and her mother, who were eating chocolates. An usherette was chatting comfortably with them. Lucy chided the journalist: he was a naughty boy, he went up to visit other women but didn’t so much as come and see if they wanted anything to drink! Then, changing the subject:

‘You know, I thought Nana was excellent!’

She had tried to get him to stay in her box for the second act, but he’d escaped, with a promise to meet them on the way out. Outside the theatre,

down below, Fauchery and La Faloise lit cigarettes. People were blocking the pavement, rows of men who had come down the steps were breathing in the fresh night air, while a steady rumbling came from the boulevard.

Meanwhile Mignon had just dragged Steiner along to the café in the theatre. Seeing the success that Nana was having, he began to talk about her enthusiastically, while observing the banker out of the corner of his eye. He knew him well, he had twice helped him to deceive Rose and then, once Steiner had got over his fling, had brought him back to her, faithful and repentant. In the café too many customers were squashed around marble tables. Some were standing, drinking very fast, and the wide mirrors threw this jumble of heads into an infinity of reflections, making the narrow room look immeasurably longer, with its three chandeliers, its moleskin-covered seats, its spiral staircase draped with red. Steiner went to sit at a table in the first room opening on to the boulevard, where they had opened the doors a bit too early in the season. As Fauchery and La Faloise were passing, the banker stopped them.

‘Come and have a beer with us.’

But he had only one thought in his head, to have a bouquet of flowers thrown to Nana. Finally he summoned a waiter he familiarly called Auguste. Mignon, who was listening, was watching him so intently that he grew anxious and said nervously:

‘Two bouquets, Auguste, give them to the usherette. One for each of those ladies at the right moment, understand?’

At the other end of the room, a girl of eighteen at most, the back of her head propped against the frame of a mirror, was standing in front of an empty glass as though numbed by her long and useless wait. Under the natural curls of her lovely ash-brown hair she looked virginal, with velvety eyes that were soft and candid. And she wore a dress of faded green silk with a round hat that had been dented by someone’s hand. The cold night air made her face look completely white.

‘Oh look, there’s Satin!’ muttered Fauchery when he saw her.

La Faloise questioned him. Oh, she was a streetwalker, a nonentity. But she was such a little urchin, they took pleasure in getting her to talk. And the journalist, raising his voice, asked:

‘What are you doing here, Satin?’

‘Getting bored to death,’ replied Satin unperturbed.

The four men were delighted at this and began to laugh.

Mignon told them there was no need to hurry; they needed twenty minutes to change the set for Act Three. But the two cousins who had finished their beer wanted to go back up; they were feeling cold. Then Mignon, left alone with Steiner, put his elbows on the table and looking him straight in the eyes, said:

‘Well? Agreed—we’ll go to her place, I’ll introduce you… This is between ourselves, mind you, my wife doesn’t need to know.’

Once back in their seats Fauchery and La Faloise noticed a pretty woman seated in the second row of boxes, modestly attired. She was accompanied by a gentleman who had a serious expression on his face, an office manager in the Ministry of the Interior known to La Faloise through having met him at the Muffats’. As for Fauchery, he thought her name was Madame Robert, an honest woman who only had one lover at a time, and always somebody respectable.

But they were forced to turn round. Daguenet was smiling at them. Now that Nana had been a hit, he was not hiding any longer, he had just been enjoying her success in the corridors. Next to him, the truanting schoolboy had not left his seat, such was the stupor of admiration into which he had been plunged by Nana. She was It, she was Woman. And he was blushing fiery red, continually putting on his gloves and taking them off again. Then, as his neighbour had been talking about Nana, he dared to ask a question.

‘Excuse me, sir, but do you know that lady in the play?’

‘Yes, a little,’ Daguenet assented, surprised and nervous.

‘So do you know her address?’

The question was put so crudely that he felt like slapping him.

‘No,’ he said curtly.

And he turned his back. The blond boy realized he had spoken out of turn. He went even redder and sat there, in fear and trembling.

The three knocks sounded, the usherettes, their arms piled with cloaks and overcoats in the midst of the crowd coming in again, made strenuous efforts to return people’s things. The claque applauded the set, a cave on Mount Etna hollowed out of a silver mine, with sides as shiny as new crowns. At the back Vulcan’s forge glowed like a setting sun. Right from the start of Scene Two Diana was making arrangements with the god, who had to pretend to be going on a journey in order to leave the field free for

Venus and Mars. Then Diana was alone on stage, but only briefly, when Venus arrived. A thrill went through the spectators. Nana was naked. She was naked, brazenly and serenely naked, confident of the irresistible power of her flesh. She was wearing nothing but a thin gauzy material. The curve of her shoulders, her Amazonian breasts with rosy tips uplifted, stiff as spears, her wide hips swaying voluptuously, her fair, plump thighs, the whole of her body could easily be imagined under the diaphanous cloth, as white as the foam on the sea. She was Venus born of the waves, with nothing but her hair to cover her. And when Nana raised her arms you could see the golden hairs of her armpits in the footlights. Nobody clapped. No one was laughing any more, men's intent faces were straining forward, their noses thin, mouths quickened and dry. It was as though a puff of wind, very gentle but charged with a dull sense of foreboding, had passed over. Suddenly the woman was emerging from the child, causing unease, bringing that madness of her sex, opening up unknown desire. Nana was still smiling but it was the knowing smile of the man-eater.

'My God!' was all Fauchery could say to La Faloise.

Plumed Mars meanwhile was rushing to the rendezvous and found himself between two goddesses. The scene was played very subtly by Prullière. Caressed by Diana who wanted to make one last effort with him before delivering him over to Vulcan, cajoled by Venus who was spurred on by the presence of her rival, he abandoned himself to these sweet caresses like a pig in clover. The scene ended with a grand trio and it was then that an usherette appeared in Lucy Stewart's box and threw two enormous bouquets of white lilac on to the stage. There was clapping, Nana and Rose Mignon acknowledged them while Prullière picked up the bouquets. One section of the stalls turned, smiling, towards the box occupied by Steiner and Mignon. The banker, with the blood rushing to his face, gave some sudden little jerks of his chin, as though he had suffered a blockage in his throat.

What followed succeeded in captivating the audience. Diane disappeared in a bad temper. Immediately, sitting on a mossy seat, Venus called to Mars to come over to her. Never before had anyone dared to stage such a seduction scene. Nana, her arms around Prullière's neck, was drawing him to her when Fontan, miming very comically and exaggeratedly the face of the outraged husband who has caught his wife red-handed, appeared at the back of the cave. He was holding the famous net of chain

mail. For one moment he swung it like a fisherman about to cast his nets. And by a cunning trick Venus and Mars were caught in the trap, covered in the net, and the happy lovers held fast in that position.

A murmur rose, a sigh that swelled and grew louder. A few hands were clapping, all the opera glasses were trained on Venus. Gradually Nana had won her way into the hearts of her public and now every man in the theatre was feeling it. Desire, like that of a rutting beast, which she had created, had grown ever stronger and now filled the whole theatre. Now her least gesture breathed longing into them, she twisted them round her little finger. Shoulders leaned forward, muscles vibrated as though invisible bows had been drawn across them, the back of their necks tingled and the hairs quivered in the warm and errant breath from who knew what woman's mouth. Fauchery saw the schoolboy truant in front of him jump out of his seat with passion. Out of curiosity he looked at the count, who was very pale with pursed lips, and the hefty figure of Steiner, whose apoplectic face was fit to burst; at Labordette who was looking through his opera glasses with the astonished expression of a horse-trader admiring a perfect mare; at Daguenet whose ears were bright red and quivering with delight. Then, on an impulse he turned and glanced behind him, and was astonished at what he saw in Muffat's box. Behind the countess, who was wearing a white and stony expression, the count had got to his feet, his mouth wide open, his face marbled in red, while nearby in the shadow the blurry eyes of the Marquis de Chouard had become like cats' eyes, phosphorescent, sequinned with gold. They were choking, their hair felt heavier on their sweating heads. They had been there for three hours, their breath had warmed the air with a human odour. In the blazing gaslight, the dust hanging in the air thickened, static beneath the chandelier. The entire audience was trembling, slipping into a sort of vertigo, weary and excited, overcome by sleepy midnight desires like the inarticulate murmurs from the beds of trysting lovers. And Nana, in the face of this swooning public, of these fifteen hundred people crowded together, sunk in the weariness and nervous exhaustion of the end of a spectacle, remained victorious with her marble flesh, her sex strong enough to destroy them all and emerge unscathed.

The play came to an end. At Vulcan's triumphant summons the whole of Olympus processed before the lovers with 'oohs' and 'aahs' of stupefaction and ribaldry. Jupiter said: 'My son, I think it's very frivolous of you to call us over to see such a thing.' Then there was a sudden reversal of events in

Venus’s favour. The Chorus of Cuckolds, introduced once again by Iris, begged the ruler of the gods not to grant their request. Since the ladies had been staying at home, life had become intolerable for the men. They preferred to be deceived and happy—and that was the moral of the play. Venus was set free, Vulcan obtained a legal separation. Mars made it up with Diana. Jupiter, to have some peace at home, sent his little laundress into a constellation. And they dragged Cupid out of his cell, where he had been making some little paper dolls instead of conjugating the verb *aimer*. The curtain fell on an apotheosis of the Chorus of Cuckolds on their knees singing a paeon of praise to Venus, smiling and imperious in her sovereign nakedness.

The spectators had already got up and were heading for the door. The writers were named and there were two encores amongst a thunder of bravos. The cry of ‘Nana! Nana!’ rang out furiously round the theatre. The room was not yet empty when everything went dark. The footlights were extinguished, the chandelier dimmed, and long folds of grey cloth were slipped over the boxes near the stage and over the gilded galleries. And the room, once so warm and full of chatter, suddenly fell into a heavy somnolence as a smell of damp and dust rose in the air. On the edge of her box, waiting for the crowd to disperse, Comtesse Muffat, erect and muffled up in her furs, was peering into the shadows.

In the corridors people were jostling the desperate usherettes amongst piles of clothes that had fallen to the floor. Fauchery and La Faloise had hurried to be there at the doors when people were leaving. Men were lined up along the hall and slow, interminable queues were descending the double staircase in an orderly compact fashion. Steiner, dragged along by Mignon, had been among the first to leave. The Comte de Vandeuvres left with Blanche de Sivry on his arm. For a moment Gaga and her daughter seemed to be at a loss, but Labordette was quick to get them a cab and he gallantly closed the door for them. No one saw Daguenet leave. The truant schoolboy with cheeks burning, determined to wait outside the stage door, ran to the Passage des Panoramas,* whose iron grille was shut, and Satin, standing on the pavement, brushed against him with her dress. But he was in despair and rejected her with some violence before disappearing into the middle of the crowd with tears of desire and frustration in his eyes. Spectators were lighting cigars and going away humming ‘When Venus walks in the evening’. Satin had gone back outside the Café des Variétés where Auguste

let her scrape up the remains of the sugar from people's glasses. A fat man, who came out very flustered, eventually carried her off into the shadows of the boulevard, which was little by little quietening down.

Some, however, were still leaving. La Faloise was waiting for Clarisse. Fauchery had promised to give Lucy Stewart a lift with Caroline Héquet and her mother. They arrived, and were occupying a whole corner of the hall, laughing very loudly when the Muffats went by with icy expressions on their faces. Bordenave had just pushed open a small door and obtained the solemn promise of a review by Fauchery. He was sweating. His face looked burnt as though he were drunk on success.

'So that will definitely be two hundred performances,' La Faloise said to him obligingly. 'The whole of Paris will be heading for your theatre.'

But Bordenave, getting angry and brusquely pointing with his chin at the audience which was now filling the foyer, this crowd of men with dry lips and feverish eyes, all still inflamed and possessed by Nana, cried out in a rage:

'For God's sake, call it my bordello, you stubborn idiot!'

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CHAPTER 2

AT ten o'clock next morning Nana was still asleep. She lived on the second floor of a large new house in the Boulevard Haussmann whose owner rented it out to single ladies before the paint was even dry. A rich Moscow businessman who had come to spend the winter in Paris had set her up in that apartment, paying six months in advance. It was too spacious for her. The furnishing had never been completely finished. The tasteless luxury of the room, the little consoles and gilded chairs clashed with the second-hand bric-a-brac, the small mahogany side-tables and zinc candelabra trying to look like Florentine bronze. It all smacked of a young woman who had been left in the lurch by her first real protector, and who had fallen foul of men of dubious character, a launch into society that was beset by problems, an unfortunate beginning hampered by refusals for credit and threats of eviction.

Nana was lying on her stomach, her face, pale with sleep, buried in the pillow, which she was hugging in her bare arms. The bedroom and dressing room were the only two rooms that a local decorator had taken any trouble over. A glimmer of light crept under one of the curtains, so you could make out the rosewood chest, the hangings and the seats of brocaded damask with large blue flowers on their grey background. But in this close, sleepy room, Nana woke with a start as though surprised to find no one lying next to her. She stared at the second pillow with lacy edges next to hers, its hollow still warm, and fumbled for the electric bell at her bedside.

'So has he gone?' she asked the maid who came at her summons.

'Yes, Madame, Monsieur Paul left nearly ten minutes ago... As Madame was tired, he didn't want to disturb her. But he told me to tell Madame that he would be back tomorrow...'

As she was speaking, Zoë, the maidservant, opened the shutters. The daylight poured in. Zoë, a brunette who wore her hair in little plaits, had a long thin face like a dog, livid and blemished, with a flat nose, thick lips, and black eyes which constantly darted here and there.

'Tomorrow, tomorrow,' repeated Nana who was still half asleep. 'Is it his day tomorrow?'

‘Yes, Madame, Monsieur Paul has always come on Wednesdays.’

‘Oh no! I’ve just remembered!’ the young woman exclaimed, sitting up. ‘It’s all changed. I meant to tell him this morning... He’ll find the Wog here. He’ll make a big fuss!’

‘Madame didn’t tell me that, I couldn’t know that,’ said Zoë softly. ‘When Madame changes her days she ought to inform me so that I know... So is Old Skinflint not to come on Tuesdays anymore?’

‘Old Skinflint’ and ‘Wog’ was what they in all seriousness between themselves called Nana’s two clients, a businessman from the Faubourg Saint-Denis, a man thrifty by temperament, and a certain Moldavian, purporting to be a count, whose money, always very irregular, was of dubious provenance. Daguenet had booked her for the day after Old Skinflint. As the businessman had to be home by eight in the morning, the young man watched out for him in Zoë’s kitchen as he left and then took his place, still warm, until ten. After that he too went about his business. Nana and he found that suited them very well.

‘Too bad!’ she said. ‘I’ll write to him this afternoon... And if he doesn’t get my letter, you can stop him coming in tomorrow.’

Meanwhile Zoë was padding around the room. She talked of the roaring success of the night before. Madame had shown such talent, she sang so beautifully! Oh! Madame wouldn’t have anything to worry about now!

Nana, propped up with her elbow on the pillow, only nodded. Her nightgown had slipped down, her hair hung loose and unkempt on her shoulders.

‘I suppose so,’ she murmured, dreamily. ‘But how can I wait till then? All sorts of annoying things are going to be happening today... Let’s see, has the concierge been up yet this morning?’

Then the two of them had a serious talk. Three months’ rent was owing and the proprietor was threatening eviction. There was a row with the creditors, the man who hired out cabs, a laundrywoman, a dressmaker, a coal merchant, and more, who came and sat on a bench in the hall every day. The coal merchant was especially scary, he shouted up the stairs. But Nana’s main problem was her little Louis, a child she’d had when she was sixteen and whom she left with his wet-nurse in a village on the outskirts of Rambouillet.* This woman was demanding three hundred francs to return little Louis to his mother. Nana, who had been seized by a fit of maternal

love since her last visit to the boy, was in despair at not being able to fulfil her plan, which had become fixed in her head, of paying off the nurse and placing the child with her aunt, Madame Lerat, in Batignolles,* where she could visit him as often as she liked.

In the meantime the maidservant was hinting that Madame ought to have told the Old Skinflint she needed money.

‘But I did, I told him everything,’ cried Nana. ‘He said he was overburdened with financial obligations. He can’t manage on a thousand francs a month. And the Wog hasn’t got a sou at the moment. I think he’s gambled it all away. As for poor Mimi, he badly needs a loan himself. He’s been cleaned out by a fall in share prices and he can’t even afford to buy me a bunch of flowers any more.’

She was talking about Daguenet. In this dozy state she had no secrets from Zoë. The latter, used to such confidences, received them with respectful sympathy. Since Madame was happy to chat about her affairs, she would take the liberty of saying what she thought. She was very fond of Madame, in any case, and had left Madame Blanche on purpose to come here and goodness only knew that Madame Blanche would have moved heaven and earth to get her back! She had no shortage of offers of work, she had quite a reputation. But she would stay with Madame through thick and thin because she believed in Madame’s future career. And she summed up her advice: when you were young, you did silly things. But right now, you had to keep your wits about you because the men were only in it for their own pleasure. Oh, there wouldn’t be a shortage of them now! Madame would only have to say the word to satisfy her creditors and get the money she needed.

‘But all that’s not helping me with my three hundred francs,’ repeated Nana, twisting her fingers into the straying hair from her chignon. ‘I need three hundred today, immediately. It’s so stupid me not knowing one single person who would give me three hundred francs.’

She racked her brains, she had intended to send Madame Lerat to Rambouillet; as it happened she was expecting her that morning. Her frustration at not being able to satisfy this whim spoiled her triumph of the previous evening. Just think that amongst all those men who had given her such an ovation yesterday, there was not one who would let her have fifteen louis! And in any case, you couldn’t accept money just like that. Oh dear! How unlucky she was! And she kept coming back to the subject of her

baby, he had blue eyes like a cherub, he lisped ‘Maman’ in such a funny little way you would laugh fit to burst!

But at that very minute a rapid buzz on the front doorbell was heard. Zoë came back saying in a confidential tone:

‘It’s a woman.’

She had seen this woman a score of times, yet affected never to know her and not to be aware of her relations with women in financial difficulty.

‘She said her name was—Madame Tricon.’

‘That Tricon woman!’ Nana exclaimed. ‘Well I never! That’s right, I’d forgotten... Show her in.’

Zoë ushered in an elderly lady, very tall, with her hair in ringlets, who gave the impression of a countess doing the rounds of the lawyers. This woman would slither out of the room, soundless as a snake, when a gentleman arrived. She might just as well have stayed. But La Tricon did not even sit down. There was only a brief exchange of words.

‘I’ve got someone for you... Do you want him?’

‘Yes, how much?’

‘Twenty louis.’

‘What time?’

‘Three o’clock. So is it agreed?’

‘Agreed.’

La Tricon immediately started talking about the weather, it was dry and good for walking. She still had four or five people to see. And she departed, consulting her little notebook as she went. Left alone, Nana seemed relieved. A little shiver touched her shoulders before she dived down in the warm bed again, luxuriating in it with the laziness of a cat who feels the cold. Her eyes gradually closed and she smiled at the thought of dressing up little Louis the next day; while as she dozed off, the feverish dreams she’d had all night returned, and she could hear again that prolonged chorus of bravos like a basso continuo lulling her to sleep.

At eleven, when Zoë let Madame Lerat into the bedroom, Nana was still asleep. But she woke at the sound and said instantly:

‘Oh, it’s you! You have to go to Rambouillet today.’

‘That’s why I’ve come,’ said her aunt. ‘There’s a train at twelve-twenty. I’m in time to catch it.’

‘No, I haven’t any money till later,’ said the young woman, stretching, pushing out her breasts. ‘You have some lunch and then we’ll see.’

Zoë brought her dressing gown.

‘Madame,’ she whispered. ‘The hairdresser’s here.’

But Nana did not care to go into the dressing room. She shouted:

‘Come in, Francis!’

A smart gentleman pushed open the door. He said good morning. At that precise moment Nana was getting out of bed, her legs bare. She was not in any hurry, she stretched out her arms so that Zoë could slip on the sleeves of her dressing gown. And Francis, very much at ease, waited in a dignified manner without turning his back. Then when she had sat down and he had given her hair a preliminary comb-through, he began to speak.

‘Perhaps Madame has not seen the newspapers. There’s a very good article in the *Figaro*.’

He had brought the newspaper. Madame Lerat put her spectacles on and read the article aloud, standing in front of the window. She stood tall and erect, like a gendarme. Her nose wrinkled when she read out an appreciative remark. It was a review by Fauchery, written straight after he left the theatre, two very lively columns, full of witty sarcasm about the actress and fierce admiration for the woman.

‘Excellent!’ said Francis.

Nana did not give a damn that people made jokes about her voice. That Fauchery, he was a nice man, she’d reward him for his kindness. After rereading the article, Madame Lerat brusquely declared that all men had the devil in their legs, and she refused to offer any further explanation, satisfied with this ribald reference that she alone understood. But Francis had almost finished lifting and tying up Nana’s hair. He took his leave, saying:

‘I shall look out for the evening papers, half past five as usual, is that right?’

‘Bring me a pot of pomade and a pound of chocolates from Boissier’s!’* cried Nana across the room as he shut the door.

Then the two women, left to themselves, realized they had not greeted each other properly. And they deposited energetic kisses on each other’s cheeks. They enthused over the article. Nana, half asleep till then, was once again possessed by her triumph. Oh yes, Rose Mignon wouldn’t be best pleased this morning! Madame Lerat had not wanted to go to the theatre

because, she said, the emotion churned her up, so Nana began to tell her about the evening, getting intoxicated on her own version of events as if the whole of Paris had been overwhelmed by the accolades. Then, interrupting herself suddenly, she asked with a giggle whether they would have said the same thing about her little backside when she was hanging round the Rue de la Goutte d'Or.* Madame Lerat was shaking her head. No indeed, you'd never have imagined such a thing. Then she adopted a solemn tone, and called her 'my daughter'. Was she not her second mother since the real one had gone to be with her daddy and grandmother? Nana, very moved, was on the brink of tears. But Madame Lerat said that they must let bygones be bygones, the past was full of things you didn't want to rake up again and again. She had not seen her niece over a long period, for the family had accused her of going to perdition along with the little girl. As if in God's name that were possible. And she didn't ask her to tell her any secrets, she believed she had always led a decent life. Now it was enough to see her well set up and fond of her little boy. In any case all that mattered in this world was to be virtuous and to work hard.

'Whose is this baby?' she said, breaking off, her eyes gleaming with keen curiosity.

Taken by surprise, Nana hesitated a second.

'A gentleman's,' she said.

'Is that so?' her aunt replied. 'They were claiming it was a builder who beat you up. You must tell me all about it one day. You know how discreet I am! Well I'll look after him as though he were the son of a prince.'

She had retired from work as a florist and was living off her savings, six hundred francs which she had saved up sou by sou. Nana promised to rent a nice little apartment for her and would pay her a hundred francs a month as well. At the mention of this sum, her aunt forgot herself and shouted to her niece to screw them for all they were worth now she had them in her power. She was talking about men. The pair embraced once more. But as Nana was bringing the conversation round to Louiset again, in the midst of her gaiety, her face clouded over at a sudden thought.

'Oh, how annoying, I have to go out at three!' she murmured. 'What a nuisance!'

Zoë had just announced that lunch was served. They went through to the dining room where there was an elderly lady already sitting down at the

table. She had not taken off her hat and was dressed in a dark dress of an indeterminate shade between puce and goose-turd green. Nana did not appear surprised to see her there. She simply asked her why she had not come into the bedroom.

‘I heard talking,’ said the old lady. ‘I thought you had visitors.’

Madame Maloir, a respectable-looking soul, with some social graces, was an old friend of Nana’s. She acted as lady’s companion. The presence of Madame Lerat seemed to bother her at first. Then, when she realized it was Nana’s aunt, she looked more kindly on her and managed a wan smile. Meanwhile Nana, who said she was famished, made a dive for the radishes and devoured them without any bread. Madame Lerat primly refused them. Radishes gave you catarrh. Then, when Zoë brought in chops, Nana toyed with the meat and made do with sucking at the bones. From time to time she eyed her friend’s hat.

‘Is that the new hat I gave you?’ she asked eventually.

‘Yes, I’ve been doing it up a bit,’ mumbled Madame Maloir with her mouth full.

The hat was exceedingly elaborate, coming to a peak at the front and with a large feather on top. Madame Maloir had a mania for revamping all her hats. She was the only person who knew what suited her and she could make the most elegant head covering look like a humble bonnet. Nana, who had bought her this hat on purpose so that she wouldn’t be embarrassed any more when she went out with her, almost lost her temper. She cried:

‘Well, take it off at least!’

‘No, thank you,’ the old lady replied with a dignified look. ‘It’s not in my way and I can eat perfectly well with it on.’

After the chops there was cauliflower and the remains of some cold chicken. But at each course, Nana pouted a little, hesitating, sniffing at it, and leaving it all on her plate. She finished her lunch with fruit compote.

Dessert was a lengthy business. Zoë did not clear the table before serving coffee. The ladies had simply pushed their plates away. They were still talking about the lovely evening they’d had the night before. Nana rolled cigarettes and smoked them, tilting right back on her chair. And as Zoë stood there leaning against the sideboard with her hands by her sides, they ended up hearing the story of her life. She told them she was the daughter of a midwife in Bercy* who had got into financial difficulties.

First Zoë had worked for a dentist, then for an insurance broker. But these jobs did not suit her. And then with a touch of pride she ran through a list of all the ladies she had attended as maidservant. Zoë talked about these ladies as if she were someone who had held their fate in the palm of her hand. Of course without her, several would have got into a pickle. For instance, one day when Madame Blanche was with Monsieur Octave, her elderly husband turned up. What did Zoë do? She pretended to trip over as she crossed the salon, her husband hurried to fetch her a glass of water from the kitchen, and Monsieur Octave made good his escape.

‘Oh, what a marvellous story!’ said Nana, listening with a warm interest, a sort of humble admiration.

‘I’ve had lots of bad experiences,’ began Madame Lerat.

And, drawing closer to Madame Maloir, she revealed her secrets. Both of them were dunking their sugar lumps in their brandy. But Madame Maloir listened to other people’s secrets without revealing anything about herself. It was said that she lived off a mysterious income in a room that no one ever entered.

Suddenly Nana exploded.

‘Aunt, please don’t fiddle with your knives... You know I can’t abide it.’

Without being aware of it, Madame Lerat had just put two knives in a cross on the table. Not that she was superstitious, the young woman protested. When she upset salt it didn’t mean anything to her, and Fridays weren’t unlucky for her either. But with knives, it was more than she could bear, it had always come true. It was certain she would have bad luck. She yawned, then with an air of profound boredom said:

‘Two o’clock already... I have to go out. What a nuisance!’

The two old ladies looked at one another. All three nodded, and said nothing. Of course life wasn’t always fun. Nana had leaned back again, lighting another cigarette, while the others pursed their lips, discreetly and philosophically.

‘We’ll have a game of bezique* while we wait,’ said Madame Maloir after a while. ‘Do you play bezique, Madame?’

Of course Madame Lerat did, and played extremely well. There was no point in bothering Zoë, who had vanished. A corner of the table would be enough. And they folded back the tablecloth over the dirty plates. But as Madame Maloir was going to fetch the cards out of a drawer in the

sideboard, Nana said that before they settled down to play it would be very nice if she would write a letter for her. She did not like writing because she wasn't sure of her spelling, while her old friend wrote letters that were full of feeling. She hastened to fetch some fine writing paper from her bedroom. An inkwell, a cheap bottle of ink, and a rusty quill pen were lying on a small table. The letter was for Daguenet. Madame Maloir, on her own initiative, wrote in her best longhand: 'My darling boy', and then warned him not to come the next day because 'it wasn't possible'. But 'far or near at every moment of the day, she was with him in her thoughts'.

'And I end with "a thousand kisses",' she murmured.

Madame Lerat had nodded her approval at each phrase. Her eyes lit up, she adored being in the thick of love intrigues. So she wanted to have her say, and with a tender air, cooed:

' "A thousand kisses on your beautiful eyes." '.

'Yes that's it: "A thousand kisses on your beautiful eyes",' Nana repeated, while a beatific expression passed over the faces of the two old ladies.

They rang for Zoë to take the letter down to a delivery boy. As it happened, she was chatting with the boy from the theatre who was bringing Madame a daily bulletin that had been forgotten in the morning. Nana told the boy to come up, and asked him to take the letter to Daguenet on the way back. Then she questioned him. Oh! Monsieur Bordenave was mighty pleased. People had already booked for the next week. Madame would not believe how many people had been asking for her address today. When the boy left, Nana said she would be gone at most half an hour. If people came visiting, Zoë should tell them to wait. As she was speaking, the bell rang. It was a creditor, the man who hired out cabs. He had been sitting on the bench downstairs in the hall. Well, let him twiddle his thumbs for as long as he liked. There was no hurry.

'I must go!' said Nana, with a lazy yawn, stretching again. 'I ought to be down there.'

But she didn't move. She was watching her aunt play, she had just declared four aces. Chin in hand, Nana became engrossed in the game. But she jumped when she heard it strike three.

'Oh hell!' she exclaimed loudly.

Then Madame Maloir, who was counting tricks, encouraged her in her soft voice.

‘You should go and get your business over straight away.’

‘Be quick,’ said Madame Lerat, shuffling the cards. ‘I’ll get the half-past-four train if you are here with the money by four.’

‘Oh, I shan’t be long.’ Zoë gave her a hand with her dress and hat. She didn’t care if she looked smart or not. As she was going to go downstairs, there was another ring on the doorbell. It was the coalman this time. Oh well, he could keep the cabman company, that would keep them all amused. But afraid of causing a scene, she crossed the kitchen and slipped out down the servants’ staircase. She went that way often, it was all right so long as she kept her skirts hitched up.

‘You can forgive a good mother anything,’ said Madame Maloir sententiously, when she was on her own with Madame Lerat.

‘Four kings, eighty,’ the latter replied. She played like one obsessed.

And both of them got stuck into the interminable game.

The table had not been cleared. A slight fug filled the room, the smell of the lunch, the smoke from the cigarettes. The ladies started to dip sugar lumps in their brandy again. They had been playing and taking sips for twenty minutes, when at a third ring of the bell, Zoë came in abruptly and pushed them out of the way as if they were her close friends.

‘Oh no! There’s someone else at the door. You can’t stay here. If a lot of people arrive, I need the whole apartment. Come on now, out of the way!’

Madame Maloir wanted to finish the game, but Zoë made as though to grab the cards from her and she decided to shift it all without disturbing the game while Madame Lerat removed the bottle of cognac, the glasses, and the sugar. And both of them made haste into the kitchen, where they settled down at a corner of the table between the drying cloths and the sink, which was still full of dishwater.

‘We said three hundred and forty. It’s your turn.’

‘Hearts.’

When Zoë came in again, she found them totally absorbed once more. There was a pause as Madame Lerat was shuffling the cards, and then Madame Maloir asked:

‘Who is it?’

‘Oh, no one special,’ the maid answered casually. ‘A young lad... I was going to send him away but he’s so nice-looking, no trace of a beard, blue eyes and girlish looks, that in the end I told him to wait. He’s got an enormous bunch of flowers and refused to put them down. Maybe I should have given him a good hiding, a boy like that, wet behind the ears, he ought to be still in school!’

Madame Lerat went to fetch a jug of water to make a grog. Dipping the sugar lumps in the brandy had made her thirsty. Zoë muttered that she could do with one as well. She said her mouth tasted sour as anything.

‘So—where have you put him?’ Madame Maloir asked.

‘Oh, in the little dressing room at the back, the room with no furniture. There’s only Madame’s trunk and a table there. That’s where I put all the *lower orders*.’

And she was liberally sugaring her grog when the electric bell made her jump. Good heavens above! Would they not leave her in peace to have her drink? If the bell was going already, it would be quite a party. Nonetheless she made haste to open it. Then when she came back, she said to Madame Maloir who was giving her a questioning look:

‘No one, just a bunch of flowers.’

All three of them nodded to each other as they drank. Then there were two more rings one after the other as Zoë finally cleared the table, putting the plates one by one into the sink; but it was nothing important. She kept the whole kitchen informed about what was happening, repeating twice her deprecating ‘No one, just a bunch of flowers’.

Meanwhile these ladies, between two card tricks, laughed when she described the looks on the creditors’ faces in the hall when the flowers arrived. Madame would find the bunches on her dressing table. A shame they were so expensive and she couldn’t even get ten sous for them. Well, there was a lot of money going to waste.

‘Myself,’ said Madame Maloir, ‘I’d be happy to live for a day off what men spend on flowers for women in Paris.’

‘I’m sure you’re right, you’re not difficult to please,’ murmured Madame Lerat. ‘Even if we just had the money for the string round the stems... Four queens, sixty, my dear.’

It was ten to four. Zoë was surprised Madame was staying out so long. Usually when Madame was obliged to go out in the afternoon she got it

over with in next to no time. But Madame Maloir declared that things didn't always turn out the way one would wish. Life was full of ups and downs, of course, said Madame Lerat. It was better to wait. If her niece was late, it was no doubt because she was delayed by her business affairs, wasn't it? In any case they were not put out at all. It was pleasant in the kitchen. And as Madame Lerat had no hearts left, she played diamonds.

The doorbell started ringing again. When Zoë returned, she was radiant.

'It's fat Steiner, my dears!' she said as she came in, lowering her voice. 'I've put him in the little drawing room.'

Then Madame Maloir told Madame Lerat about the banker, as she was not acquainted with these gentlemen. Was he in the process of leaving Rose Mignon? Zoë nodded, she was *au courant*. But again she had to answer the door.

'Big trouble!' she said quietly as she came back. 'It's the Wog! I told him several times that Madame was out but he's gone and sat himself down in the bedroom... We weren't expecting him till this evening.'

At a quarter past four Nana was still not home. Whatever could she be doing? It made no sense. Two more bunches of flowers were brought. Annoyed, Zoë looked to see if there was any coffee left. Yes, the ladies would be pleased to finish the coffee, it would wake them up. They were falling asleep, huddled on their chairs, continually reaching out and taking another card from the pile. The half-hour chimed. Something must definitely have happened to Madame. They whispered to one another.

Suddenly, forgetting herself, Madame Maloir announced in ringing tones:

'I've got the five hundred. Quint major trumps!'

'For heaven's sake, be quiet!' said Zoë angrily. 'What will all those gentlemen think?'

And in the ensuing silence and then in the suppressed murmurs of these two old ladies bickering, there was the sound of rapid footsteps ascending the servants' staircase. Here was Nana at last. Before she had opened the door, you could hear that she was out of breath. She arrived very red, and seeming cross. Her skirt, whose strings must have broken, were brushing against the steps and the flounces had trailed in the wet, in some filthy stream running down from the floor above where they had a slovenly maidservant.

‘There you are! And about time too!’ Madame Lerat said, tight-lipped, still put out by Madame Maloir’s five hundred points. ‘You should be pleased with yourself for keeping us all waiting!’

‘Madame is really not being sensible!’ Zoë added.

Nana, already annoyed, was exasperated by all these rebukes. Was this how they were going to greet her after the trying time she’d been having!

‘Just shut up!’ she shouted.

‘Hush, Madame, we’ve got visitors,’ said the maid.

Then, lowering her voice, the young woman faltered, out of breath:

‘Well, do you think I’ve been enjoying myself? It took for ever. I should have liked to see you in my place... I was furious, I wanted to slap him... And there was no cab to get me back. Lucky it’s right nearby. Still I hurried back as fast as I could.’

‘Have you got the money?’ asked her aunt.

‘Fancy asking me that!’ answered Nana.

She had flopped down on a chair next to the stove, her legs tired after all her running. And still out of breath, she pulled out of her bosom an envelope in which there were four hundred-franc notes. You could see the notes through a large tear which she had made herself in the envelope, to check what was inside. The three women around her were staring at the envelope, a coarse piece of paper, dirty and crumpled in her small gloved hands. It was too late, Madame Lerat could not go to Rambouillet till next day. Nana started to go into long explanations.

‘Madame, there are lots of people waiting,’ the maidservant reminded her.

But her anger flared up again. Let them all wait till later, when she wasn’t so busy. And as her aunt was reaching out for the money:

‘Oh no, not all of it,’ she said. ‘Three hundred for the nurse. Fifty for the train and your expenses, that’s three hundred and fifty. I’m keeping fifty.’

The main problem was finding change. There were not ten francs in the whole house. They didn’t even ask Madame Maloir, who was listening as if it was no concern of hers, since she never had on her person more than six sous for the omnibus. Finally Zoë went out, saying she would go and look in her box, and brought back a hundred francs in coins of a hundred sous. They counted them out on a corner of the table. Madame Lerat left immediately, after promising to bring back Louiset next day.

‘Did you say we have visitors?’ Nana asked, still sitting there to rest her legs.

‘Yes, Madame, three.’

And she named the banker first. Nana made a face. If Steiner thought she would put herself out for him just because he had thrown her a bouquet the day before!

‘Anyway,’ she declared, ‘I’ve had enough. I shan’t see any of them. Go and say that you’re not expecting me back.’

‘Madame will perhaps think better of it and receive Monsieur Steiner,’ Zoë cautioned with a frown, not budging, cross at seeing her mistress on the point of doing something stupid again.

Then she mentioned the Moldavian who must be finding that time was hanging rather heavy in the bedroom. At that, Nana was furious and dug her heels in even more. Nobody, she wanted to see nobody! Who had let in this leech of a man!

‘Kick them all out! I’m going to have a game of bezique with Madame Maloir. I’d much rather do that.’

The doorbell cut her off. That was the last straw! Another pain in the neck! She forbade Zoë to go and open the door. The latter ignored her and left the kitchen. When she reappeared, she said with an air of authority, putting two cards on the table:

‘I told them Madame was at home... These gentlemen are in the salon.’

Nana had risen in a furious temper. But the names of the Marquis de Chouard and Comte Muffat de Beuville on the visiting cards succeeded in calming her down. She was silent for a moment.

‘Who on earth are they?’ she asked finally. ‘Do you know them?’

‘I know the old man,’ answered Zoë, pursing her lips discreetly.

And as her mistress continued to give her a questioning look, she added simply:

‘I’ve seen him around somewhere.’

These words seemed to make up the young woman’s mind for her. She reluctantly left the kitchen, that warm refuge where you could chat and let yourself enjoy the smell of coffee keeping warm on the embers. Behind her, she left Madame Maloir who was now winning. She had still not taken off her hat, but to make herself more comfortable she had undone the ribbons and thrown them over her shoulders.

In the dressing room where Zoë helped her quickly to put on her dressing gown, Nana got her own back for the annoyance she'd had to put up with, by muttering swear words under her breath about men. This bad language troubled the maidservant, for it made her sadly realize that Madame's working-class origins could not be easily changed. She even went so far as to beg Madame to tone down her words.

'Why the hell should I?' Nana replied crudely. 'They're filthy swine, they love it.'

Nevertheless she put on her princess air, as she called it. Zoë had held her back just as she was about to enter the drawing room and, taking the initiative, ushered the Marquis de Chouard and Comte Muffat into Nana's dressing room instead. It was much better that way.

'Gentlemen,' said the young woman with studied politeness, 'I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting.'

The two men greeted her and sat down. An embroidered tulle blind dimmed the light in the dressing room. It was the most elegant room in the apartment, furnished in a light fabric; there was a large marble dressing table, an inlaid cheval-glass, a chaise longue and blue satin armchairs, and on the dressing table an avalanche of roses, lilac and hyacinths, with their strong, heady perfume. In the steamy air, among the stale smell of the basins, there were occasional whiffs of a more pungent aroma from a few twigs of dry patchouli crushed into small pieces in the bottom of a bowl. Gathering herself together and pulling her ill-fastened gown around her, Nana gave the impression of having been taken by surprise while in the process of getting dressed; her skin was still moist and she was smiling and as though startled amid all her lace.

'Madame,' said the count solemnly. 'Please forgive us for bothering you. We have a request to make. This gentleman and I are members of a local charity.'

The Marquis de Chouard gallantly hastened to add:

'When we found out that a great artiste was living in this house, we promised ourselves that we would come and talk to you particularly on behalf of our poor. Talent always goes with compassion.'

Nana made a pretence of modesty. She answered with little nods, while making rapid calculations. It must be the old man who had brought along the other. He had a lecherous glint in his eye. Yet she also had to be wary of

the other one, whose temples were throbbing in a peculiar way. He'd have been quite capable of coming on his own. Yes, that was it, the concierge had said her name and they were egging each other on, each for his own purposes.

'Certainly, gentlemen, you were right to come and see me,' she said, beaming with goodwill.

But the electric bell made her shudder. Not another visit! And that Zoë who kept on answering the door! She went on:

'I am very happy to be able to help.'

In actual fact she was rather flattered.

'Oh, Madame,' went on the marquis, 'if you only knew what a state they are in! Our arrondissement has more than three thousand poor people, and yet it is one of the richest. You can't imagine such poverty: children going hungry, sick women, deprived of all aid and dying of cold...'

'Poor things!' Nana exclaimed, very moved.

Her emotion was such that her beautiful eyes filled with tears. She leaned over suddenly, unconscious of her body, and through her open gown you could see her bosom, while her bent knees revealed the curves of her thighs under the filmy material. A red flush appeared on the chalky face of the marquis. Comte Muffat, who was about to say something, lowered his eyes. It was too warm in this dressing room, heavy, close, like a hothouse. The roses were wilting and a heady scent came up from the patchouli in the dish.

'At times like these one would like to be very rich,' Nana added. 'Well, when all's said and done, we all do what we can. Believe me, gentlemen, had I known...'

Very moved, she was on the point of letting slip something stupid, so did not finish her sentence. She had a moment's embarrassment, no longer remembering where she had just put her fifty francs when she took off her dress. But then she remembered: it must be on the corner of the washstand, under an upturned pot of pomade.

As she got up, there came a long ring on the doorbell. Ha, another one! Would there never be an end to it? The count and the marquis had also got to their feet and the latter's ears pricked up on hearing the bell. No doubt he was familiar with the sound. Muffat looked at him, then they both looked away. They were embarrassed, they became formal with one another again,

the one solid and square, with a full head of hair, the other hunching his thin shoulders, upon which a few sparse strands of hair fell from the dome of his head.

‘My goodness,’ Nana said, fetching the ten big silver coins, and deciding to make a joke of it, ‘I shall weigh you down, gentlemen. This is for the poor...’

And the charming little dimple in her chin was visible. She wore her naturally innocent expression as she held out the pile of crowns in her open palm, offering it to the two men, as much as to say: ‘Come, who wants some?’ The count was quickest, he took the fifty francs. But one coin remained and he had to touch the young woman’s flesh in order to retrieve it, flesh that was warm and smooth and left him feeling excited. She was still laughing in delight.

‘Here you are, gentlemen,’ she said. ‘Another time, I hope to be able to give you more.’

There was no longer a pretext for them to stay. They took their leave and made for the door. But the moment they were about to leave, the doorbell went again. The marquis could not restrain a pale smile, while a dark shadow passed over the count’s face. Nana kept them talking a few more seconds to let Zoë find another spare corner. She did not like people meeting each other in her home. Today it must be full to overflowing! So she was relieved when she saw the drawing room was empty. Had Zoë stuffed them into the cupboards then?

‘Goodbye, gentlemen,’ she said, stopping at the threshold of the drawing room.

Her laugh and her look of candour enfolded them. Comte Muffat bowed, troubled in spite of his sophistication, needing some air; the dressing room had made his head spin; the scent of flowers and woman had been suffocating. And behind his back, the Marquis de Chouard, confident that he couldn’t be seen, his face suddenly contorted, wetted his lips and dared to give Nana a broad wink.

When the young woman went back into her dressing room where Zoë was waiting for her with letters and visiting cards, she exclaimed, laughing louder than ever:

‘There go my fifty francs on those two poor sods!’

She wasn’t cross but it seemed funny to her that a couple of men had cleaned her out. All the same they were bastards, she hadn’t a sou left. But the sight of these cards and letters put her in a bad mood again. As far as the letters went, they were all right; they were from men who had applauded her the day before and were making her offers. As for the visitors, they could go to hell.

Zoë had distributed them all over the place. And she pointed out that the apartment was very convenient, each room opening out on to the corridor. It wasn’t like at Madame Blanche’s, where you had to go through the drawing room. So Madame Blanche had encountered many problems.

‘You must send them all away,’ Nana continued, pursuing her train of thought. ‘Start with the Wog.’

‘Oh, I got rid of him a long while back,’ said Zoë with a smile. ‘He only wanted to tell Madame that he couldn’t come this evening.’

This was a great stroke of luck. Nana clapped her hands. He wasn’t coming, thank goodness for that! She would be free then! And she sighed in relief, as if she had been let off the most abominable of tortures. Her first thought was for Daguenet. That poor love, and to think she had written that he must wait till Thursday! Quick, Madame Maloir could write another letter! But Zoë said that Madame Maloir had slipped away without anyone noticing, as she usually did. So Nana, after talking about sending someone, hesitated. She was very tired. A whole night’s sleep! That would be so good! The idea of this treat in the end won out. For once she could reward herself with that.

‘I’ll go to bed as soon as I get back from the theatre,’ she said, relishing the thought, ‘and you’re not to wake me up until midday.’

Then, raising her voice:

‘Go on, shove the rest of them downstairs!’

Zoë did not move. She would not have allowed herself to give advice openly to Madame, but she contrived to give Madame the benefit of her experience when Madame seemed to be getting excited and headstrong.

‘Monsieur Steiner too?’ she asked tersely.

‘Of course,’ Nana replied. ‘Him first!’

The maid still waited, to give Madame time to reflect. Would Madame not be proud to take away from her rival Rose Mignon such a wealthy gentleman, who was so well known in all the theatres?

‘My dear girl, please hurry up and tell him that he is annoying me,’ said Nana, who understood full well what she meant.

But abruptly she changed her mind. The next day she might want him. And she exclaimed, with a childish gesture, laughing and winking:

‘Well after all, if I did want to have him, the shortest way is still to show him the door.’

Zoë was very impressed. She looked at her mistress, suddenly admiring, then went to get rid of Steiner, without more ado.

Meanwhile Nana waited a few minutes to allow her to make a clean sweep, as she put it.

You wouldn’t believe such an invasion! She peered into the drawing room; it was empty. The dining room was empty too. But as she continued her inspection, reassured, making sure there wasn’t anyone left, she pushed open the door of a small room and suddenly came upon a slip of a lad. He was calmly perched on top of a trunk, with an enormous bunch of flowers on his knees and looking as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

‘Oh, good gracious!’ she cried. ‘There’s one more in here!’

When he saw her, the boy had jumped down, red as a beetroot. And he didn’t know what to do with his bouquet, shifting it from one hand to the other, choked with emotion. His youthful countenance, his embarrassment, the droll expression on his face as he held the flowers made Nana burst into peals of laughter. So were children coming to call on her now? Were they arriving in their swaddling clothes? She resigned herself, familiarly, maternally, patting her thighs and joking:

‘Do you want me to wipe your nose, you baby?’

‘Yes please,’ answered the boy in a low, pleading voice.

That reply sent her into even more fits of laughter. He was seventeen. His name was Georges Hugon. The day before, he had been at the Variétés. And he had come to see her.

‘Are those flowers for me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Give them to me then, stupid!’

But as she took the bunch of flowers, he suddenly caught hold of her hands, with the voracity of youth. She had to fight him off so that he would let her go. Well, here was a young lad who went straight to the point! While she was scolding him, she had gone pink and was smiling. But she sent him

away, telling him he could come back later. His head was reeling, he couldn’t find the way out.

Nana returned to her dressing room, where Francis arrived almost immediately to do her proper coiffure. She did not dress until evening. Sitting in front of the mirror, bending her head beneath the deft hands of the hairdresser, she remained silent and contemplative, when Zoë came in, saying:

‘Madame, there’s one who won’t go.’

‘Well then, you’ll have to leave him there,’ she replied calmly.

‘And another thing, they’re still arriving.’

‘Pooh! Tell them to wait. They’ll go away when they are starving.’

Her mood had changed. Now she found it thrilling to keep men waiting. She had an amusing idea. She ducked away from Francis’s grasp, and ran to draw the bolt herself. Now they could wait in a great heap in the adjoining room; presumably they wouldn’t get through the wall! Zoë could come in by the small door which led to the kitchen. Meanwhile the electric bell wouldn’t stop ringing. Every five minutes it buzzed again, loud and clear, as regularly as a well-oiled machine. And, to pass the time, Nana counted them. But she suddenly remembered something.

‘What about my chocolates then?’

Francis had forgotten about the chocolates as well. He took a packet out of the pocket of his frock coat with the discreet gesture of a man of the world offering a present to a lady friend. However, each time he sent her the account he added the price of the chocolates to his bill. Nana placed the bag between her knees and began to munch them, moving her head beneath the little pats of the hairdresser.

‘Oh God,’ she groaned after a silence, ‘there’s a whole lot more!’

Three times, in quick succession, the bell had rung. Now the rings were coming thick and fast. There were some modest, tremulous ones like a shy first declaration of love. There were bold rings that carried on vibrating under an impatient finger. Some were hasty, they seemed to whizz rapidly through the air. As Zoë said, it was a real tintinnabulation, a ringing that might call the whole district to arms, a horde of men taking it in turn to press the ivory button. That silly Bordenave had definitely given her address to far too many people, the whole of last night’s audience was going to turn up!

‘By the way, Francis,’ Nana said. ‘Have you got five louis?’

He drew back, studied the coiffure, then said calmly:

‘Five louis, that depends.’

‘Oh, you know,’ she replied, ‘if you have to have guarantees...’

And without finishing her sentence, in an expansive gesture, she indicated the adjacent rooms. Francis lent her the five louis. In brief moments of respite, Zoë came in to prepare Madame’s toilette. Soon she had to dress her while the hairdresser waited, wanting to administer one finishing touch to the coiffure. But the maid was constantly called away to answer the doorbell, and Madame was left half laced and with only one shoe on. Despite being so experienced, Zoë’s head was starting to spin. After she had distributed the men all over the place, using every single corner of the apartment, she just had to confine up to three or four together, and it flew in the face of all her principles. Well, too bad if they gobbled one another up, that would make more room! And Nana, safely bolted in, made fun of them, saying she could hear them breathing. They must be looking very droll with their tongues hanging out, like little dogs sitting on their backsides all in a ring. Her success of the night before continued, with this pack of men who were after her.

‘Just as long as they don’t break things,’ she muttered.

She imagined their hot breath coming through the cracks in the wall and began to feel uneasy. But when Zoë ushered in Labordette, the young woman gave a cry of relief. He wanted to talk to her about an account he had paid on her behalf to the Justice of the Peace. She didn’t listen to what he was saying, but kept repeating:

‘You can come with me... We’ll have dinner together and then you can take me to the Variétés. I’m not on until nine-thirty.’

That nice Labordette, what a good thing he arrived just at that moment! He was never demanding. He was a friend to women and helped them with little tasks. So, as he crossed through the apartment, he had got rid of the creditors in the hall. These worthy gentlemen did not want to be paid, in any case, quite the opposite. If they had stayed so long, it was to congratulate Madame and offer to renew their services to her after last night’s great success.

‘Come on, let’s go,’ said Nana, who was ready.

At that moment Zoë came in, shouting:

‘Madame, I’m not answering the door any more. There’s a queue on the stairs.’

A queue on the stairs! Francis himself, despite the phlegmatic Anglo-Saxon air that he affected, began to laugh as he put his combs away. Nana had taken Labordette’s arm and was pushing him into the kitchen. And she escaped, finally free of men, happy in the knowledge that she could be alone with Labordette no matter where, without having to fear any silliness on his part.

‘You can bring me back to my front door,’ she said while they were going down the servants’ staircase. ‘That way I can be sure... Just imagine, I can sleep by myself for a whole night. What luck for once, my friend!’

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CHAPTER 3

COMTESSE SABINE, as people were in the habit of calling Madame Muffat de Beuville, so as to distinguish her from the count's mother who had died the year before, was 'at home' every Tuesday in her town house in the Rue Miromesnil* on the corner of the Rue de Penthièvre. This was a huge square building that had been lived in by Muffats for the last hundred years. The sleepy facade on the street, tall and dark, looked as solemn as a convent, its huge shutters almost permanently closed. Behind the house in a small dank garden, trees reached up, searching for the sunlight, so tall and spindly that you could see the branches above the slate roof.

That Tuesday, at about ten, there were scarcely a dozen people in the drawing room. When she was expecting only close friends, the countess did not open the small drawing room or the dining room; it was far cosier chatting by the fireside. The drawing room was moreover huge and had a high ceiling. Four windows gave on to the garden, and it smelled of damp on that rainy evening at the end of April, in spite of the solid logs burning in the hearth. The sun never reached that room. By day there was a dim, greenish light, but in the evening when the lamps and chandeliers were lit, it was never other than sombre with its Empire-style massive mahogany furniture, its hangings and yellow velvet seats with large satin designs. Entering, you were in an atmosphere of cold dignity, of manners from a bygone age, giving off an odour of sanctity.

On the other side of the fireplace, however, opposite the armchair in which the count's mother had died—a square, rigidly upright chair upholstered in a hard material—Comtesse Sabine was sitting in a deep easy chair whose red silk padding was as soft as eiderdown. This was the only modern piece of furniture, a little personal touch in all the severity, which clashed with everything else.

'So,' the young woman remarked, 'I gather we shall be seeing the Shah of Persia...'

They were talking about the princes who would be coming to Paris for the Exhibition. Several ladies were sitting in a circle round the fire. Madame du Joncquoy, whose brother, the diplomat, had just completed a

mission in the East, provided more information about the court of Nazar-Eddin.*

‘Is something wrong, my dear?’ enquired Madame Chantereau, the wife of an ironmaster, seeing the countess shiver slightly and grow pale.

‘No, no,’ the countess replied, with a smile. ‘I am a little chilly, that’s all. It takes so long for this drawing room to warm up!’

And her disconsolate look travelled from floor to ceiling. Her daughter, Estelle, a sulky young miss of sixteen, gawky and unprepossessing, got off the stool she had been sitting on and without a word stepped forward to prop up one of the logs which had rolled off. But Madame de Chezelles, a convent friend of Madame Sabine’s, five years younger than her, cried:

‘Well I’d just love to have a drawing room like yours! At least you can entertain... They only build boxes these days... If I were in your shoes!’

She was excited, waving her arms about as she explained that she would change the furnishings, the seats, everything. She would give balls that everyone in Paris would flock to. Behind her, her husband, a magistrate, listened gravely. People said she was having an affair, quite blatantly. But they didn’t blame her and she was invited just the same because, as they said, she was a featherbrain.

‘Ah, our Léonide!’ was all Comtesse Sabine said, smiling wanly.

She made a languid gesture to express her meaning. She certainly wasn’t going to change her decor now, after having lived with it for seventeen years. It would stay just the way her mother-in-law had wished it to be while she was alive. Then, returning to the conversation:

‘They tell me that we shall also see the King of Prussia and the Russian Tsar.’

‘Yes, they say we are going to have some marvellous celebrations,’ said Madame du Joncquoy.

Steiner the banker, recently introduced into the house by Léonide de Chezelles, who knew everybody who was anybody in Paris, was chatting on a sofa which stood between two of the windows. He was questioning a Deputy, and trying skilfully to extract information from him about some movement he suspected on the Bourse, while Comte Muffat, standing in front of them, was listening silently, his face even greyer than usual. Four or five young men formed another group, near the door, where they were surrounding Comte Xavier de Vandeuvres, who was telling them a story in

hushed tones, no doubt a very dubious one, because they were choking back their laughter. All by himself in the middle of the room, sitting heavily in an armchair, a stout man, a senior civil servant at the Ministry of the Interior, seemed to be asleep with his eyes open. But when one of the young men apparently didn't believe the story, Vandeuvres raised his voice:

'You are too cynical, Foucarmont; you'll miss out on all the fun in life.'

And, chuckling, he came over to where the women were. The last in a noble line, witty and with effeminate manners, he was getting through a fortune with a voracious appetite that nothing could assuage. His stable, one of the most famous in Paris, was costing him an unbelievable amount of money; his losses in the Cercle Impérial* amounted each month to a worrying number of louis. His mistresses cost, year in year out, a farm and some acres of land or forests, a whole swathe of his vast domains in Picardy.

'You are a good one to talk about sceptics when you don't believe in a thing yourself,' said Léonide, making a little place for him next to her. 'You are the one who misses out on the fun.'

'Exactly so,' he replied. 'I want others to learn from my experience.'

But they made him be quiet. He was shocking Monsieur Venot. Then, the women having moved away, they could see a small man of sixty with bad teeth and a faint smile sitting on a chaise longue. He was ensconced, as though completely at home, listening to what they were all saying, not uttering a word. He shrugged, as much as to say he wasn't shocked at all. Vandeuvres had resumed his tone of moral superiority and added gravely:

'Monsieur Venot is well aware that I believe what I have to believe.'

This was a declaration of faith. Even Léonide seemed satisfied. At the back of the room the young men had stopped laughing. Drawing-room society was too highbrow for their taste, they weren't enjoying it at all. A chill had passed through the room, you could hear Steiner's nasal tones in the silence, the discreet responses of the Deputy had in the end infuriated him. For a moment Comtesse Sabine stared into the fire. Then she renewed the conversation.

'I saw the King of Prussia last year at Baden. He looks well for his age.'

'The Comte de Bismarck will be with him,' said Madame du Joncquoy. 'Do you know the count? I had lunch with him at my brother's—oh, some

years ago—when he was representing Prussia in Paris. A man whose recent successes* I'm at a loss to understand.'

'Why is that?' asked Madame Chantereau.

'Goodness me, how can I explain? He is not to my liking. There is something coarse and ill-mannered about him. And besides, I think he's stupid.'

Everybody started talking about the Comte de Bismarck. Opinions were very divided. Vandeuvres knew him and said he was a fine drinker and a fine gambler. But the door opened at the height of the discussion and Hector de La Faloise appeared. Fauchery, who was following, went up to the countess and bowed:

'Madame, I remembered your gracious invitation...'

She smiled and said something polite. The journalist, having greeted the count, remained momentarily at a loss in the middle of the drawing room, where the only man he recognized was Steiner. Vandeuvres turned round and came over to shake his hand. And straight away Fauchery, pleased to see him and with the pressing need to unburden himself, drew him aside, saying in an undertone:

'Is it still all right for tomorrow?'

'It certainly is!'

'At midnight, at her house.'

'I know, I know, I'm going to take Blanche along.'

He wanted to slip away and go back to the ladies to put forward another argument in favour of Monsieur de Bismarck. But Fauchery kept him back.

'You'll never guess who she told me to invite!'

And he nodded slightly in the direction of the Comte de Muffat, who at that moment was discussing an item in the budget with the Deputy and Steiner.

'You're joking!' Vandeuvres exclaimed, incredulous and amused.

'I swear! I had to promise faithfully I'd take him. I've come partly for that reason.'

They both laughed silently, and Vandeuvres, hurrying back to the group of ladies, exclaimed:

'I can assure you that, contrary to what you say, Monsieur de Bismarck is very witty... For instance he said something really charming one evening when I was there...'

Meanwhile La Faloise, having overheard the few quick words exchanged under their breath, looked at Fauchery, hoping for an explanation, which was not forthcoming. Whom were they talking about? What was going on the following evening, at midnight? He did not leave his cousin's side. The latter had gone to sit down. He showed a particular interest in Comtesse Sabine. Her name had often been mentioned in his presence and he knew that, married at seventeen, she must now be thirty-four and that she had led a sheltered life ever since her marriage, cloistered between her husband and her mother. In social circles some said she was as cold as a nun, others felt sorry for her and mentioned her lovely laugh, her big flashing eyes before she was shut up in the depths of this old town house. Fauchery studied her and hesitated. A friend of his, a captain in Mexico,* recently deceased, had, the night before he left, after dinner, made one of those violent confessions which the most discreet of men are apt to blurt out at times. But it was only a dim recollection; they had dined well that night; and he hesitated when he saw the countess dressed in black and smiling in the middle of this ancient salon. A lamp placed behind the dimpled brunette emphasized her fine profile, in which only her rather full lips indicated a sort of imperious sensuality.

'What are they going on about Bismarck for!' muttered La Faloise who claimed not to like social gatherings. 'It's so boring here. What a strange idea to want to come.'

Fauchery suddenly asked:

'So is the countess not sleeping with anybody?'

'Oh good heavens, no,' he stammered, visibly discomfited, forgetting his pose. 'Wherever do you think you are!'

Then, realizing that his indignation was somewhat lacking in sophistication, he added, sinking into the depths of the sofa:

'Well, my word, I say no, but how do I know?... There's a little fellow over there, Foucarmont, who's always hanging around. Obviously stranger things happen. It's no concern of mine... But what is certain is that, if the countess enjoys a fling, she is sly about it as well, for it's not common knowledge and nobody talks about it.'

And then without Fauchery having to go to the trouble of questioning him, he told him all he knew about the Muffats. In the middle of these ladies' conversation, which was continuing by the fireplace, both lowered

their voices; and you would have thought, to see them with their white ties and gloves, that they were discussing some serious issue, carefully choosing their words. Old Madame Muffat, whom La Faloise had known very well, was unbearable, always hand in glove with the clergy. Moreover she had a haughty way with her and a bossy manner which made everybody do her bidding. As for Muffat, the late-born son of a general created count by Napoleon I, he had naturally found favour after 2 December.* He was not a very cheerful presence either, but had the reputation of being a highly respectable and principled man. He had opinions from a bygone age and a most exalted idea of his responsibilities to the crown, of his dignities and his virtues, so that he carried his head like the Holy Sacrament upon his shoulders. It was Madame Muffat who had given him this fine education. Confession every day, no escapades, no youthful fun of any kind. He practised his religion, he had violent and bloody crises of faith like attacks of burning fever. Finally, to describe him down to the last detail, La Faloise whispered a word in his cousin's ear.

'I don't believe it!' said the latter.

'On my word of honour, they swear it! He was still a virgin when he married.'

Fauchery looked at the count and laughed. His face was framed by whiskers, no moustache, and seemed squarer and harder, since he was quoting statistics to Steiner who was defending his position.

'Heavens, he does look as if that were true,' he muttered. 'What a nice present for his wife! Oh, the poor little woman, what a bore he must have been! I bet she doesn't know anything about anything!'

At that point Comtesse Sabine was in fact speaking to him. He did not hear her because he was finding Muffat's situation so extraordinary and intriguing. She repeated her question.

'Monsieur Fauchery, did you not publish an article about Monsieur de Bismarck? Did you speak to him?'

He quickly got up, approached the group of ladies, trying to recover his composure, and managing an answer, with perfect aplomb.

'Oh goodness! I admit, Madame, I wrote the article when I'd read some biographies that appeared in Germany. But I never met Monsieur de Bismarck.'

He remained there next to the countess. As he chatted with her, he carried on with his train of thought. She looked young for her years. You would have given her twenty-eight at the most. Her eyes especially, half obscured by heavy eyelids of a bluish shade, had a youthful glimmer. She was the child of a broken marriage, spending one month with the Marquis de Chouard and one month with the Marquise; she had married very young when her mother died, pushed into it by her father no doubt, as she was an encumbrance to him. A terrible man, the marquis, and about whom strange stories were beginning to circulate in spite of his extreme religiosity. Fauchery asked if he would have the honour of being introduced to him. Certainly her father would be coming, but much later. He was so busy! The journalist, who thought he knew where the old man spent his evenings, kept a straight face. But a mole on the countess's left cheek near her mouth took him by surprise. Nana had exactly the same one. That was funny. On the mole were some small curly hairs, but whereas Nana's hairs were blonde, this woman's were jet-black. No matter, she was not sleeping with anyone.

'I've always wanted to get to know Queen Augusta,'* she said. 'People say she's so good and pious. Do you think she will accompany the king?'

'They think not, Madame,' he replied.

She wasn't sleeping with anyone, so much was obvious. You only had to observe her manner towards her daughter, so insignificant and awkward on her stool. This sepulchral drawing room with its church-like odour told you everything you needed to know about the browbeaten life she led under that iron hand, the kind of rigid discipline she was subjected to. She had not made any mark of her own on this ancient establishment, black with damp. It was Muffat with his pious upbringing, his penitences and his fasting, whose imprint was on it, who was the dominant presence in this house. But when he suddenly noticed a little old man with bad teeth and a thin smile sitting in his armchair behind the ladies, he was even more persuaded. He knew this character, Théophile Venot, a former lawyer who had specialized in ecclesiastical trials. He had retired on a large fortune, he led a rather mysterious existence, was received everywhere with great respect, even feared a little, as though people felt there was a certain power, an other-worldly force in him working in the background. On the outside, he was very modest, he was churchwarden in the Madeleine* and had accepted the simple post of assistant mayor in the town hall of the ninth *arrondissement*,

to keep himself busy, as he said. Goodness, the countess was surrounded by these people! There was nothing doing there!

‘You are quite right, it’s deadly here,’ said Fauchery to his cousin when he had escaped from the circle of ladies. ‘We’ll go.’

But Steiner, whom Comte Muffat and the Deputy had just left, was coming over to them in an angry temper, sweating, grumbling under his breath:

‘For God’s sake, if they won’t say anything, let them hold their tongues... I’ll find some who will talk.’

Then, edging the journalist into a corner and changing his tone, with a triumphant air:

‘So it’s tomorrow... I’m of the party, old chap!’

‘Oh really?’ murmured Fauchery, astonished.

‘You didn’t know... Oh, I had such trouble catching her at home! And in addition, Mignon wouldn’t leave my side.’

‘But the Mignons will be there too.’

‘Yes, so she said... Anyway, she invited me in and asked me to come... punctually at midnight after the theatre.’

The banker was beaming with pleasure. He winked and added with innuendo:

‘And everything *all right* with you?’

‘What do you mean?’ enquired Fauchery, pretending not to understand. ‘She wanted to thank me for my article, so she came to see me.’

‘Oh yes, yes. You people are lucky. You get your reward... By the way, who’s paying tomorrow?’

The journalist spread his arms out as much as to say nobody knew. Just then Vandeuvres beckoned to Steiner, who had met Monsieur de Bismarck. Madame du Joncquoy was almost convinced. She summed it up with these words:

‘He made a bad impression on me, I think he’s got a mean face... But I’m sure he is very intelligent. That explains his success.’

‘No doubt,’ said the banker, a Frankfurt Jew, smiling palely.

Meanwhile La Faloise dared to question his cousin, pursuing him and hissing in his ear:

‘So supper in a lady’s house tomorrow evening then? I wonder whose!’

Fauchery put his finger to his lips as a sign that people could hear. They must be careful what they said.The door had just opened again and an elderly lady came in, followed by a young man whom the journalist recognized as the schoolboy truant, who, on the night of *La Blonde Vénus*, had shouted out the famous words '*Très chic!*' which they were still talking about. The arrival of this lady created a stir in the drawing room. Comtesse Sabine had got up to meet her. She had taken both her hands and addressed her as her 'my dear Madame Hugon'. Seeing his cousin looking curiously at them, La Faloise tried to impress him by filling in a few details: Madame Hugon, the widow of a retired lawyer from Les Fondettes, an ancient family estate near Orléans, kept a pied-à-terre in Paris in a house she owned in the Rue de Richelieu. She was spending a few weeks there at present to settle in her youngest son who was in his first year reading law. She had once been an intimate friend of the Marquise de Chouard and had been there when the countess was born, looking after her for months at a time in her house before she had got married. They were still very close.

'I've brought Georges with me,' Madame Hugon said to Sabine. 'He's grown, hasn't he!'

The young man with his bright eyes and fair curls and girlish features greeted the countess unaffectedly and reminded her of a game of shuttlecock they had played two years before at Les Fondettes.

'Is Philippe not in Paris?' Comte Muffat asked.

'No no,' replied the elderly lady. 'He's in the garrison in Bourges.'

She sat down and talked with pride about her elder son, a strong young fellow who had joined up on an impulse and rapidly reached the rank of lieutenant. All the ladies surrounded her, with reverence and sympathy. Conversation began again, more politely and tactfully. And when he saw this respectable lady, Madame Hugon, her motherly face lit up by such a lovely smile, her abundant white hair parted in the middle, Fauchery thought he had been silly to suspect Comtesse Sabine for one second.

Nonetheless, the big chair of padded red silk where the countess was sitting had just caught his eye. It struck him as bizarre, clashing violently as it did with the other pieces in this smoke-filled salon, and it disturbed him. Certainly it could not have been the count who'd had this voluptuous, languorous piece of furniture placed in the room. You would have said it was some kind of bid for independence, a stirring of desire and pleasure. Then Fauchery forgot where he was and started daydreaming, his thoughts

however returning to the half-remembered confidence that had been shared with him one evening in the back room of a restaurant. Driven by a sensual curiosity, he had desired to be introduced into the Muffats' household. Since his friend had remained in Mexico, who knew? One had to wait and see. No doubt it was a silly idea; but it nagged at him, he felt attracted, his baser instincts were aroused. The large chair had a rumpled and reclining look, which amused him now.

'Right, shall we go?' asked La Faloise, promising himself he would get hold of the name of the woman they were having supper with.

'In a minute,' Fauchery replied.

And he was no longer in a hurry to leave, giving himself as pretext the invitation he had been charged with and which wasn't easy to make. The ladies were chatting about a taking of the veil, a very touching ceremony, which had been stirring the emotions of Parisian society for the last three days. It was the Baronne de Fougeray's eldest daughter who, obeying an irresistible vocation, had just joined the Carmelite Order. Madame Chantereau, a distant cousin of the Fougerays, was saying that the baroness had had to take to her bed next day after the ceremony, she was so distraught and emotional.

'I had a very good seat,' declared Léonide. 'But I thought it was all rather odd.'

But Madame Hugon was feeling sorry for the poor mother. How heartbreaking it must be to lose your daughter in that way!

'People accuse me of being overly devout,' she said with her usual frank composure. 'But I nevertheless think children who insist on committing that kind of suicide are very cruel.'

'Yes, it's terrible,' agreed the countess, with a little shudder as though she was cold, huddling up a little more in her big armchair in front of the fire.

Then the ladies had a discussion. But their voices were still muted. Their earnest conversation was interrupted from time to time by little bursts of mirth. The two lamps covered in pink lace on the mantelpiece cast a subdued light and on the other furniture a little way away there were only three more lamps, which left the vast drawing room softly shaded.

Steiner was bored. He was telling Fauchery about some affair of young Madame de Chezelles, whom he called simply 'Léonide'; 'a real bitch', he

claimed, lowering his voice behind the ladies' armchairs. Fauchery looked at her in her fine dress of pale blue satin, perched prettily on the edge of her armchair, slim and with a boyish confidence, and was rather surprised to see her there; people behaved much better at Caroline Héquet's; her mother had considerably enhanced the reputation of that house. It would be a good subject for an article. What a strange world, this Parisian society! The most strait-laced salons were being invaded. Obviously the taciturn Théophile Venot, who sat there smiling and showing his rotten teeth, must be a relic from when the late countess was alive, just like the more mature ladies, Madame Chantereau, Madame du Joncquoy, and four or five old men, sitting motionless in various corners of the room. Comte Muffat brought along officials wearing the sort of formal attire favoured by men from the Tuileries* at the time, amongst them, the chief clerk, still alone in the middle of the room, his face shaven and his eyes dull, in a costume so tight he couldn't risk moving a muscle. Almost all the young men and a few characters with superior manners accompanied the Marquis de Chouard, who had kept in with the Legitimists* after rallying to them when he joined the Council of State. There remained Léonide de Chezelles, Steiner, and a whole clique of dubious individuals in a corner, the elderly and serenely benevolent Madame Hugon standing out from among the group. And Fauchery, with an eye to his article, thought he would call it 'Comtesse Sabine's Guests'.

'Another time,' Steiner continued in a low voice, 'Léonide got her tenor down to Montauban.* She was living in the Château de Beaurecueil, five miles away, and she arrived every day in her two-horse carriage to see him at the Lion d'Or, where he lodged. The carriage waited at the door, Léonide was there for hours while the locals all gathered round and looked at the horses.'

There was a silence, a few solemn seconds ticked by beneath the high ceiling. Two young men were whispering to one another but then they also fell silent, and the only sound was the muffled tread of Comte Muffat as he walked across the room. The lamps seemed to have grown pale, the fire was going out, the old friends of the household sitting in the armchairs they had sat in for the last forty years were swathed in shadow. It was as though, while they were talking, the guests had sensed the apparition of the count's mother with her noble, glacial air. But already Comtesse Sabine was taking up the conversation:

‘Well anyway, there were more rumours... The young man was dead apparently and that explained the poor child’s turning to religion. Moreover, they say that Monsieur de Fougeray would never have consented to the marriage.’

‘They say lots of other things too!’ cried Léonide, wildly.

She burst into giggles, refusing to say any more. Her gaiety was infectious and Sabine pressed her handkerchief to her lips. And the sound of this laughing, in the solemnity of the vast room, gave Fauchery a little shock. It sounded like crystal breaking. It was definitely like something cracking. All the voices started up again. Madame du Joncquoy expressed doubts, Madame Chantereau knew that they had intended to marry, but things had got no further than that. Even the men dared voice their opinions. For a minute or two there was a babble of voices in which the diverse elements of the salon, Bonapartists and Legitimists mingled with the sceptics amongst them, all spoke at once, talking over one another. Estelle rang for someone to put more wood on the fire, the valet turned up the lamps. It was like a reawakening. Fauchery smiled as though relieved.

‘Oh my God, they get wedded to the Lord when they can’t marry their cousins,’ hissed Vandeuvres, annoyed by this question, and went over to speak to Fauchery. ‘My dear fellow, have you ever come across a woman, if she’s loved by some man, become a *nun*?’

He did not wait for a reply. He’d had enough. And under his breath he asked:

‘Tell me, how many shall we be tomorrow? There will be the Mignons, Steiner, you, Blanche and myself. Who besides?’

‘Caroline, I think... Simonne, Gaga for certain. One never knows exactly, does one? On these occasions you think there will be twenty and it turns out there are thirty.’

Vandeuvres, who was looking at the ladies, leapt suddenly to another subject.

‘That Du Joncquoy woman must have been very pretty fifteen years ago... Poor Estelle has got lankier than ever. Must be awful to have a beanpole like that in your bed!’

But he broke off and returned to the subject of supper the next evening.

‘What’s so maddening about these stupid shindigs is that there are always the same women there. We need some new faces. Try and bring one

as a guest. Listen, I have an idea! I'm going to ask that fat man over there to bring the woman he was out with the other evening at the Variétés.'

He was speaking of the chief clerk who had dozed off in the middle of the drawing room. Fauchery enjoyed following this delicate negotiation at a distance. Vandeuvres had sat down next to him but he was not at all put out. The two of them appeared to be discussing in a measured way the question of the moment, that of knowing the nature of the real feelings which had propelled the young girl towards religion. Then the count returned, saying:

'Nothing doing, I'm afraid. He swears she is a good girl. She would refuse to come...Yet I would wager I saw her at Laure's place.'

'What! So you go to Laure's place!' laughed Fauchery. 'You dare frequent places like that! And I thought it was just poor devils like us...'

'Well, my dear fellow, you have to try everything once...'

They chuckled, their eyes twinkling, giving each other details of what was on offer in the Rue des Martyrs where the gross Laure Piédefer, for three francs, served meals to women in trouble. It was a real dive! All her girls kissed Laure on the mouth. And as Comtesse Sabine was turning her head away, having caught the odd word as she went by, they drew back, jovial and excited, nudging one another. They had not noticed Georges Hugon near them listening, blushing so much that a pink flush spread from his ears down to his girlish neck. This little innocent was both ashamed and thrilled. Ever since his mother had let him loose in the salon, he had hovered around Madame de Chezelles, the only woman he thought chic. And yet Nana put her in the shade!

'Last night,' Madame Hugon was saying, 'Georges took me to the theatre. Yes, the Variétés, it must be ten years since I last set foot in the place. The dear boy loves music... I didn't enjoy it much at all. But he was so happy! They put on strange plays nowadays. Anyway, I'm not especially interested in music, I must admit.'

'What! Madame, you don't like music?' cried Madame du Joncquoy, raising her eyes to the heavens. 'Is that possible, that one may *not* like music!'

Everybody cried out in amazement. Nobody opened their mouths to comment on this play at the Variétés, which the worthy Madame Hugon had not understood in the slightest. Immediately they launched into sentiment and a gushing admiration of the masters. Madame du Joncquoy was all for

Weber,* Madame Chantereau defended the Italians. The ladies' voices grew soft and languorous. A sort of religious quiet came over the ladies by the fireside, something rapturous like the soft psalmody in a little chapel.

'Let's see,' murmured Vandeuvres, bringing Fauchery back to the centre of the salon. 'We must unearth a woman for tomorrow, all the same. Supposing we ask Steiner?'

'Oh, Steiner,' answered the journalist. 'When he's got a woman, it means that Paris has finished with her.'

Vandeuvres meanwhile was trawling through his acquaintances.

'Just a second,' he said, 'the other day I met Foucarmont with a charming blonde. I'll tell him to bring her along.'

And he called Foucarmont over. They exchanged a few rapid words. There must have been some problem, for both of them, stepping carefully over the ladies' skirts, went off to find another young man with whom they carried on their discussion in a window recess. Fauchery, left on his own, decided to draw nearer to the fireside at the precise moment Madame du Joncquoy declared that she could not hear Weber without immediately seeing lakes, forests, and sunrises in dew-drenched countryside. But a hand touched his shoulder and a voice behind him said:

'That's not very kind of you.'

'What do you mean?' he asked, turning round and seeing it was La Faloise.

'This supper tomorrow, you might have got me an invitation.'

Fauchery was about to answer when Vandeuvres came back to say:

'It seems that the woman is not attached to Foucarmont. She belongs to that man over there. She won't be able to come. What bad luck! But I've press-ganged Foucarmont nevertheless, he'll try to get Louise from the Palais-Royal.'

'Monsieur de Vandeuvres,' asked Madame Chantereau raising her voice, 'isn't it true that they were hissing Wagner* on Sunday?'

'Oh yes, it was quite dreadful,' he answered, going forward to speak, with exquisite politeness.

Then, as no one engaged him in conversation, he went on muttering into the journalist's ear:

'I'll try a few more... These young people must know some girls.'

Then with an amiable smile, accosting men and chatting to people all over the drawing room, he mingled with various groups, slipping a few words to each, and turning away with a conspiratorial nod and a wink. It was as though he was casually passing on an order. His words did the rounds. There was the buzz of men settling matters, arranging where to meet, all under the cover of the ladies still passionately holding forth on the subject of music.

‘No, don’t talk to me about your Germans,’ Madame Chantereau repeated. ‘Singing is joy and light. Have you heard La Patti* sing in the *Barber*?’

‘Delightful!’ murmured Léonide, who only tapped out tunes from operettas on her own piano.

But Comtesse Sabine had rung the bell. When she did not have so many guests on a Tuesday, tea was served in the salon itself. While she supervised a little table being cleared by a valet, the countess was watching the Comte de Vandeuvres. She still had that vague smile which revealed the whiteness of her teeth a little. And as the count went by, she questioned him.

‘So what are you plotting, Monsieur de Vandeuvres?’

‘Me, Madame?’ he replied, unperturbed. ‘I am not plotting anything.’

‘Oh really? You seemed to me so busy... Here, you can make yourself useful.’

She handed him an album and asked him to put it on the piano. But he contrived to whisper to Fauchery that Tatan Néné, who owned the most gorgeous pair of titties you had seen that season, and Maria Blond, the girl who had just made her debut at the Folies-Dramatiques,* would be of the party. La Faloise trailed around after him all the time, waiting for an invitation. In the end he made the offer himself. Vandeuvres agreed straight away, and made him promise to bring Clarisse, but as La Faloise pretended to have some scruples about that, he reassured him, saying:

‘Well, I’m inviting you, so you don’t need to worry!’

La Faloise, however, would still have liked to know the name of the hostess. But the countess had called Vandeuvres over, and questioned him about how the English made tea. He often went to England, where he owned racehorses. According to him it was only Russians who knew how to make tea, and he told her their recipe. Then, as though he had been mulling

over something else that was on his mind while he was speaking, he broke off to ask:

‘By the way, what about the marquis? Weren’t we supposed to be seeing him?’

‘Yes indeed, my father promised me faithfully,’ the countess answered. ‘I am beginning to get worried... He must have been kept back by his work.’

Vandeuvres smiled a discreet smile. He too appeared to have some doubts about what kind of work the Marquis de Chouard was doing. He had just thought of the attractive woman whom the marquis took to the country on occasions. Perhaps she could come too?

Meanwhile Fauchery decided the moment had arrived to risk inviting Comte Muffat. Time was getting on.

‘Are you serious?’ asked Vandeuvres, who thought it was a joke.

‘Very serious... If I don’t do what I’m told, she’ll scratch my eyes out. One of her crazy ideas, you know.’

‘All right, I’ll give you a hand, my dear boy.’

Eleven o’clock struck. Helped by her daughter, the countess served tea. As only close friends had come, the cups and plates were passed round informally. The ladies didn’t even trouble to leave their armchairs in front of the fire, sipping elegantly, munching cakes as they held them in the tips of their fingers. The conversation had now moved from music to tradesmen. Boissier was the only one who could make good fondants and Catherine the only one for ices. However, Madame Chantereau championed Latinville’s.* Their speech tailed off. A lassitude came over the salon. Steiner had gone back to quietly working on the Deputy, whom he had cornered on the sofa. Monsieur Venot, whose teeth must have been ruined by sweetmeats, was eating biscuits a mouthful at a time with a little mouse-like sound, while the chief clerk with his nose in a cup was still going strong. And the countess was unhurriedly moving from one to the next, not remaining long with anyone, stopping for a few seconds to give the men an enquiring look, then smiling and passing on. The big fire had made her very flushed, she looked like the sister of her daughter, so stiff and awkward beside her. As she approached Fauchery, who was chatting to her husband and Vandeuvres, she noticed that they fell silent, so, without stopping, she went past them to give the cup of tea she was holding to Georges Hugon.

‘A lady wants to invite you to supper,’ the journalist said cheerily, addressing Comte Muffat.

The latter, who had looked gloomy all evening, seemed very surprised. What lady?

‘Why, Nana of course!’ said Vandeuvres, hastily.

The count grew more serious. His eyelids barely flickered, and what looked like a touch of migraine passed over his brow.

‘But I don’t know this lady,’ he murmured.

‘Come now, you went to visit her,’ Vandeuvres pointed out.

‘What! I did? Oh yes, the other day, for the charity board. I had forgotten. Well, it’s of no consequence, I don’t know her so I can’t accept.’

He had assumed an icy expression to indicate that this joke seemed to him in very bad taste. The place for a man of his rank was not at the table of a woman of that sort. Vandeuvres protested: it was going to be an artistes’ supper. Talent excused everything. But without listening any more to the arguments of Fauchery, who was telling them about a dinner where the Prince of Scotland,* a queen’s son, had sat down next to a former singer in a café-concert, the count was more adamant still. In fact, in spite of his exquisite politeness, he allowed himself an irritated grunt.

In the middle of drinking their cups of tea, Georges and La Faloise, standing face to face, had heard the few words exchanged nearby.

‘Aha, so it’s at Nana’s,’ murmured La Faloise. ‘I might have guessed!’

Georges said nothing, but he was bright red, his fair hair dishevelled, his blue eyes gleaming like candles, this life of immorality which he had been party to the last few days was exciting and thrilling. At last he was entering a world that was all he had ever dreamed of!

‘I don’t know her address,’ La Faloise said.

‘Boulevard Haussmann between the Rue de l’Arcade and the Rue Pasquier, third floor,’ said Georges in a rush.

And as the other man stared at him astonished, he added very red, bursting with smugness and embarrassment:

‘I’m going, she invited me this morning.’

But there had been an upheaval in the salon. Vandeuvres and Fauchery had to give up trying to persuade the count. The Marquis de Chouard had come in and everybody hurried over to him. He had moved forward with difficulty, his legs weak. And he stood there in the middle of the room, pale,

blinking, as if he had come out of some small dark street and was blinded by the bright lights.

‘I’d given up expecting you, Father,’ the countess said. ‘I would have been worried all night.’

He looked at her and did not answer, as if he did not understand what she said. His big nose looked like a pus-filled excrescence in his clean-shaven face, and his bottom lip was drooping. Madame Hugon, seeing him so overwhelmed, offered him a few kind words, full of concern.

‘You are working too hard. You ought to rest... At our age we have to leave the work to younger people.’

‘Work, oh yes! Work,’ he finally stammered. ‘Always plenty of work!’

He pulled himself together and straightened his bent back, passing a hand, with a habitual gesture, over his white hair whose sparse curls hovered somewhere behind his ears.

‘Whatever can you be working on so late?’ asked Madame du Joncquoy. ‘I thought you were at the reception of the Ministry of Finance.’

But the countess intervened.

‘My father had to study some legal documents.’

‘Yes, legal business,’ he said, ‘exactly so, legal business. I was shut up in my room. It concerns the factories, I want them to observe the day of rest. It’s so shameful that the government doesn’t act more forcefully. The churches are emptying, we’re heading for catastrophe.’

Vandeuvres had given Fauchery a look. Both found themselves behind the marquis and they were awaiting their chance. When Vandeuvres managed to get hold of him on his own to ask about the attractive woman he had taken to the country, the elderly man affected great surprise. Had he perhaps been seen with Baronne Decker at whose house he had spent a few days in Viroflay?* Vandeuvres’s only revenge was to ask abruptly:

‘Oh look, where have you been? Your elbow is covered with cobwebs and plaster.’

‘My elbow,’ he murmured, somewhat put out. ‘Oh yes, it’s true... a bit of dirt... I must have got that when I came downstairs from my study.’

Several people were leaving. It was nearly midnight. Two valets silently cleared away the empty cups and tea-plates. In front of the fireplace the ladies had changed places and drawn closer, chatting more freely as the evening sleepily drew to a close. The salon itself seemed to be falling into a

slumber, as slowly the shadows gathered from the walls. Then Fauchery spoke of leaving. However, he was again distracted by the sight of Comtesse Sabine. She was resting in her accustomed place after her duties as mistress of the house, silently gazing at a log burning down, her face so white and composed that doubts assailed him once more. In the firelight the black hair of the mole she had in the corner of her lip seemed more blonde. The spitting image of Nana, down to the colour, even. He couldn't prevent himself whispering into Vandeuvres's ear. Goodness me, that was true! He had never noticed. And both men continued the comparison between Nana and the countess. They found a vague similarity in the chin and the mouth, but the eyes weren't in the least alike. And besides, Nana looked like a good, healthy wench, whereas with the countess you never knew, she was like a sleeping cat, her claws drawn in and her paws agitated only by a little nervous quiver.

'All the same, she's beddable,' declared Fauchery.

Vandeuvres undressed her with his eyes.

'Yes, that's true,' he said. 'But I'm not at all sure about her thighs. I bet she doesn't have any thighs to speak of!'

He stopped. Fauchery gave his elbow a hard nudge, indicating that Estelle was sitting on her stool in front of them. They had just been speaking louder without noticing and she must have heard them, but she continued to sit there stiff and straight, not a hair stirring on her neck, the scrawny neck of a girl who has grown too fast. They moved three or four paces back. Vandeuvres swore that the countess was a very respectable woman.

At that moment the voices around the fireside grew louder. Madame du Joncquoy was saying:

'I grant you that Monsieur de Bismarck is perhaps an intelligent man. Only if you go as far as to call him a genius...'

The ladies had reverted to their initial subject of conversation.

'What! Is it still Monsieur de Bismarck!' Fauchery muttered. 'This time I'm definitely leaving.'

'Wait a moment,' said Vandeuvres. 'We need a final yes or no from the count.'

Comte Muffat was chatting to his father-in-law and a few serious-looking men. Vandeuvres took him aside and renewed the invitation, urging

him, saying he would himself be at the supper party. A man could go anywhere. Nobody would think ill of him when at the very most it would be out of curiosity. The count listened to these arguments stony-faced, his eyes cast down. Vandeuvres sensed him hesitate when the Marquis de Chouard came up with a questioning look. And when the marquis realized what they were talking about and Fauchery invited him as well, he shot a furtive glance at his son-in-law. There was an embarrassed silence. But each egged the other on and he would have no doubt ended up by accepting the invitation if the count had not seen Monsieur Venot looking straight at him. The little old man was no longer smiling, his face the colour of clay, his steely eyes clear and sharp.

‘No,’ he said instantly in a tone that was so firm it brooked no gainsaying.

Then the marquis was even more vehement in his refusal. He talked about morals. The upper classes should set an example. Fauchery smiled and shook Vandeuvres’s hand. He could not wait for him, he must leave at once, for he had to call at his newspaper offices.

‘Midnight at Nana’s then?’

La Faloise also left. Steiner had just said goodbye to the countess. Other men followed them. And the same words went round, everybody echoing: ‘Midnight at Nana’s’, as they went to fetch their coats in the hall. Georges, who was to leave with his mother, had stationed himself on the threshold where he was telling people the precise address, third floor, the door on the left. Meanwhile, before going out, Fauchery threw a last glance into the room. Vandeuvres had taken up his position again in the midst of the ladies, joking with Léonide de Chezelles. Comte Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard joined in the conversation while the worthy Madame Hugon was dozing off, her eyes open. Hidden behind all the skirts, Monsieur Venot seemed to have shrunk again and recovered his smile. Midnight chimed slowly in the huge gloomy room.

‘What are you saying!’ Madame du Joncquoy took up the conversation again. ‘You think Monsieur de Bismarck will declare war and beat us... Oh, I’ve heard it all now!’

Everybody was laughing at Madame Chantereau who had just repeated this opinion she had heard in Alsace where her husband owned a factory.

‘Luckily we have the Emperor,’ said Comte Muffat with his solemn formality.

That was the last thing Fauchery heard. He shut the door behind him after glancing again at Comtesse Sabine. She was calmly chatting with the chief clerk and seemed to be taking an interest in the conversation of this portly gentleman. He must have been mistaken. There was no rupture there. What a shame.

‘Well, are you coming or not?’ cried La Faloise from the vestibule.

And out on the pavement, as they went their ways, they again called to each other:

‘See you tomorrow at Nana’s!’

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CHAPTER 4

EARLIER that morning Zoë had made the apartment over to a caterer from Brébant's* and his staff of helpers and waiters. Brébant's would provide the food, the crockery, the glasses, the tablecloth and napkins, the flowers, and everything down to the chairs and footstools. Nana could not have found so much as a dozen napkins in her bottom drawer, but since she had not yet had time to establish her position in society after her debut on the stage and rejected the idea of going to the restaurant, she chose rather to have the restaurant come to her. She considered that more chic. She wanted to celebrate her great success as an actress with a supper that people would talk about afterwards. As the dining room was too small, the maître d'hôtel had set up the table in the salon with places for twenty-five people if they sat close together.

'Is everything ready?' Nana asked when she returned at midnight.

'Oh, I don't know.' Zoë's voice was cross and she seemed to be at her wits' end. 'Thank goodness I'm not in charge. They are making a terrible mess in the kitchen and the whole apartment! And besides, I had to have an argument. The other two turned up but I kicked them out.'

She meant Madame's two former gentlemen, the shop-owner and the Moldavian, whom Nana had decided to get rid of, certain of her future success and wanting to make a clean sweep, as she put it.

'What a pain in the neck they are!' she muttered. 'If they come back, threaten to go to the police.'

Then she shouted to Daguenet and Georges who were at the back of the hall, hanging up their coats. The two had met outside the stage door, in the Passage des Panoramas, and she had brought them along with her in a cab. As nobody had yet arrived, she shouted to them to come into the dressing room while Zoë was getting her ready. In haste, without changing her dress, she had her hair put up, and pinned white roses to her chignon and her corsage. The dressing room was stuffed full of the salon furniture which had had to be moved, a heap of little tables, sofas, armchairs with their legs in the air. And she was nearly ready when her dress caught in a castor and ripped. Then she was infuriated and started to swear. These things only

happened to her. In a rage she tore off her dress, a very simple dress of white gauzy material that was so transparent she needed a long chemise under it. But she immediately put it on again, not finding another she liked, almost weeping and saying she was dressed like a rag-and-bone woman. Daguenet and Georges had to hide the tear with pins while Zoë did her hair again. All three busied themselves around her, especially young Georges on his knees on the floor with his hands up her skirts. In the end she calmed down while Daguenet assured her that it must be only a quarter past twelve at most, since she had rushed through the third act of *La Blonde Vénus* like that, delivering her lines at breakneck speed and skipping couplets.

‘It’s still too good for that bunch of idiots,’ she said. ‘Did you see? What a lot of chumps tonight! Zoë, my girl, you wait here. Don’t go to bed, I might need you. My God! Here they are! And high time too!’

She escaped. Georges remained on his knees with his coat-tails sweeping the floor. He blushed when he saw Daguenet staring at him. Nonetheless, they had taken a liking to one another. They retied the bows on their cravats in front of the tall mirror and gave each other a bit of a brush as they were all white from having rubbed against Nana.

‘It looks like icing sugar,’ murmured Georges with his eager little childish giggle.

A lackey hired for the night ushered the guests into the little salon, a narrow room in which only four armchairs had been left, so that plenty of guests could get in. From the big salon next to it came the clatter of crockery and silver, while under the door gleamed a ray of bright light. Entering, Nana found Clarisse Besnus, who had been brought along by La Faloise, installed in one of the armchairs.

‘So you’re the first?’ Nana asked. Since her stage success, she treated her as an old friend.

‘Oh, it’s his fault,’ Clarisse replied. ‘He’s always afraid we’ll be late. If I’d listened to him, I wouldn’t even have had time to take off my rouge and my wig.’

The young man, who was meeting Nana for the first time, bowed and congratulated her, mentioning his cousin and hiding his excitement beneath his exaggerated politeness. But Nana, not paying any attention, shook hands and then rapidly moved on to Rose Mignon. Her manner instantly changed and she became very gracious.

‘Oh, my dear Madame, how kind! I’m so glad you could come!’

‘I am the one who is delighted, I’m sure,’ replied Rose, also full of amiability.

‘Do sit down! Is there anything you need?’

‘No, thank you. Oh, I left my fan in my fur coat. Steiner, look in the right-hand pocket.’

Steiner and Mignon had come in after Rose. The banker went out and then reappeared with the fan, while Mignon gave Nana a kiss on the cheek and made Rose do likewise. Were they not all one big happy family in the theatre? Then he winked as if to encourage Steiner. But the latter, put off his stride by Rose’s uncompromising stare, made do with depositing a kiss on Nana’s hand.

At that moment the Comte de Vandeuvres appeared with Blanche de Sivry. There was much bowing and scraping. Nana with great ceremony conducted Blanche to an armchair. Meanwhile Vandeuvres recounted with a laugh that Fauchery was having an argument downstairs because the concierge had refused to let Lucy Stewart’s carriage in. In the hall you could hear Lucy calling the concierge a useless oaf. But when the lackey opened the door she arrived with her usual cheery grace, announced herself, took hold of Nana’s two hands, telling her she had found her quite adorable from the start and thought she had a fine talent. Swelling with pride in her new role as hostess, Nana thanked her in unfeigned embarrassment. However, she seemed preoccupied since Fauchery’s arrival. As soon as she could get near him, she asked under her breath:

‘Is he coming?’

‘No, he wouldn’t,’ replied the journalist abruptly. He was taken off his guard, though he had previously prepared a story to explain Comte Muffat’s refusal.

He became aware of his stupidity when he saw the young woman’s pallor, and he tried to rephrase what he had said.

‘He couldn’t make it, he is taking the countess to a ball at the Ministry of the Interior tonight.’

‘Oh, all right,’ murmured Nana, who suspected Fauchery had been unwilling to ask him. ‘You’ll pay for that, my boy.’

‘How I loathe errands like that,’ he countered, hurt at her threat. ‘Ask Labordette to do it.’

They turned their backs on one another, crossly. At that moment, Mignon was thrusting Steiner at Nana. When she was alone, he said to her in a low voice, with the cheerful cynicism of an accomplice who wants to oblige a friend:

‘You know he’s dying to... But he’s afraid of my wife. Aren’t you going to look after him?’

Nana did not look as if she understood. She smiled, looked at Rose, her husband, and the banker, then said to Steiner:

‘Monsieur Steiner, you shall sit next to me.’

But laughter was issuing from the hall, murmurs, a flurry of gay, chatty voices as if a whole convent had been let loose. And Labordette appeared, trailing five women behind him, his ‘schoolgirls’, as Lucy Stewart mischievously called them. There was Gaga, majestic in a blue velvet dress which was too tight, Caroline Héquet, in her usual black silk trimmed with Chantilly lace, and Léa de Horn rigged out in her usual fashion, the cheerful blonde Tatan Néné, with her bosom like a wet-nurse that everyone made fun of, and lastly little Maria Blond, a skinny little girl of fifteen, with the morals of a street urchin, who was making her debut at the Folies. Labordette had brought the whole lot in one cab and they were still laughing at being so squashed up together, Maria Blond sitting on the other women’s laps. But they pursed their lips, exchanged handshakes and greetings, all of them on their best behaviour. Gaga lisped her greetings childishly in an exaggerated attempt at good manners. Only Tatan Néné, whom they had been telling as they drove along, that six Negroes, completely naked, would wait on them at Nana’s, looked around eagerly and asked where they were. Labordette called her a goose and told her to be quiet.

‘And what about Bordenave?’ asked Fauchery.

‘Oh, guess what, I’m so sorry, he can’t come,’ said Nana.

‘Yes,’ said Rose Mignon, ‘he caught his foot in a trapdoor and sprained his ankle really badly... You should have heard him swear, his leg was all bandaged up and he was stretched out on a chair!’

Then everyone was sorry not to see Bordenave. Impossible to have a successful dinner without Bordenave. But they’d try to do without him just the same. And they were already talking about something else when a roar was heard outside.

‘What’s all this about then? So here you are burying me alive!’

There was a cry, everyone turned round. It was Bordenave, very huge and red, with his stiff leg, standing on the threshold, leaning on Simonne Cabiroche’s shoulder. At present he was sleeping with Simonne. This educated girl who played the piano and spoke English was a sweet little blonde, and so delicate that she bent under the heavy weight of Bordenave, submissive but smiling. He posed for a few seconds, sensing that they made quite a picture, the two of them.

‘Well, I must be fond of you,’ he went on. ‘I was afraid I would be bored, so I said to myself: “I’m going.” ’

But he broke off to give vent to an oath:

‘Bloody hell!’

Simonne had stepped forward too quickly and his foot had just taken the weight. She lost her balance. Still smiling and bowing her pretty head like a beast afraid of being beaten, the dimpled little blonde held him up with all her strength. In the midst of the exclamations they all rushed to help. Nana and Rose Mignon pushed an armchair forward for Bordenave to sink into while the other women slid another under his leg. And all the actresses present kissed him as a matter of course. He was sighing and groaning.

‘Bloody hell! Bloody hell! Oh well, my stomach is still in good order, as you’ll see.’

More guests had arrived. There was hardly room to move in the little salon. The noise of crockery and silver had ceased. Now came the sound of an argument from the big salon, with the maître d’hôtel’s furious voice scolding someone. Nana had begun to lose patience as she did not expect any more guests and was surprised they hadn’t begun to serve dinner. She had just sent Georges in to ask what was going on, when to her astonishment more people arrived, both men and women. They were totally unknown to her. Then, a little embarrassed, she questioned Bordenave, Mignon, Labordette; they didn’t know them either. When she asked the Comte de Vandeuvres, he suddenly remembered. They were the young men he had recruited at Comte Muffat’s. Nana thanked him. All would be well, except they were going to be really pushed for space. And she requested Labordette to order seven more place-settings. He had scarcely gone out of the room when the valet ushered in three more people. Ah no, this was getting beyond a joke! There wouldn’t be room, that much was certain.

Nana, beginning to get cross, said in a superior tone that it really wasn’t the done thing. But when she saw another two arrive, she began laughing, she found it hilarious. Oh well, too bad! They would have to squash up as best as they could! Everyone was standing, except for Gaga and Rose Mignon who had found seats; Bordenave took up two armchairs for himself. There was a buzz of voices, they chatted quietly amongst themselves, stifling little yawns.

‘Well now, my girl,’ said Bordenave, ‘supposing we go and sit down to eat anyway? We are all here, aren’t we?’

‘Oh yes, we certainly are!’ laughed Nana.

She glanced around the room. But her face fell, as though she were surprised not to see a particular person there. No doubt one of her guests who had not been mentioned was missing. Then a few minutes later they saw in their midst a tall gentleman with a distinguished face and a fine white beard. And the most surprising thing was that nobody had seen him come in. He must have slipped into the small salon through a door in the bedroom that had remained half open. Silence reigned, there was a great deal of whispering. The Comte de Vandeuvres knew for certain who the gentleman was, for they had exchanged a discreet handshake. But he replied to the women’s questions with a smile. Then Caroline Héquet lowered her voice and bet he was an English lord who was going back the next day to London to get married. She knew him very well, she had invited him before. And this story did the rounds of the ladies. Only Maria Blond claimed that she knew it was a German ambassador and the proof was that he often slept with one of her friends. The men gave a brief assessment. He looked like a man of substance. Perhaps he was paying for the dinner? Probably. It looked like it. Hmm, well as long as the food was good! They didn’t know for sure. The elderly gentleman with the white beard was already fading in their memories when the maître d’hôtel opened the door of the big salon.

‘Madame, supper is served.’

Nana had accepted Steiner’s arm without seeming to notice that the elderly gentleman without a partner had also moved forward to offer his arm. But in any case it was in no way an orderly procession. Men and women made their way through slowly in a relaxed fashion, joking and good-humoured about this lack of formality. A long table stretched from one end to the other of the vast room, which had been emptied of furniture.

But the table was still not long enough, for the plates were touching one another. Four candelabra, each with ten candles, shone on the place settings, and on a silver-plated surtout with sheaves of flowers to right and left. It was very luxurious, but it was the luxury of a restaurant, porcelain with threads of gold but no monogram, a worn silver service dulled by constant washing, crystal glasses, replaceable from among the dozens of incomplete sets in countless bazaars. It resembled a house-warming that had been celebrated too soon, as though someone had unexpectedly come into a fortune and nothing was yet in place. One of the lamps was missing. The candelabra whose very tall candles were scarcely burning at all, cast a pale, yellowish light over the fruit dishes, the tall cake stands, the bowls, where the fruit, petits fours, and dishes of compote were set alternately at regular intervals.

‘Please sit where you like,’ said Nana. ‘You’ll enjoy it more.’

She remained standing at the centre of the table. The elderly man, whom no one knew, had placed himself on her right while she kept Steiner on her left. Some guests were already sitting down when a volley of oaths came from the small salon. It was Bordenave, who had been forgotten and who had had a terrible time trying to get up from his two armchairs, bawling, calling for that bitch of a Simonne who had disappeared with the rest. The women rushed back, full of compunction. Bordenave came into view, supported and helped along by Caroline, Clarisse, Tatan Néné, and Maria Blond. It was a real palaver settling him at the table.

‘In the middle, opposite Nana!’ they cried. ‘Bordenave in the middle! He shall preside!’

Then the ladies sat him down in the middle. But he needed an extra chair for his leg. Two women raised his leg and gently extended it. It did not matter, he could eat sitting sideways.

‘Bloody hell!’ he groaned, ‘What a great lump I am! Oh, my little girlies, Papa is in your hands.’

He had Rose Mignon on his right and Lucy Stewart on his left. They promised to take good care of him. Now everybody was finding their place. The Comte de Vandeuvres sat between Lucy and Clarisse, Fauchery between Rose Mignon and Caroline Héquet. On the opposite side Hector de la Faloise had made haste to sit near Gaga, in spite of Clarisse beckoning from across the table; while Mignon, who clung to Steiner, was only separated from him by Blanche and had Tatan Néné on his left. Finally, at

each end were the young women, Simonne, Léa de Horn, Maria Blond in any order, all squashed together. That was when Daguenet and Georges Hugon got more and more friendly, while looking smilingly in Nana's direction.

Meanwhile, as two people were still standing, the rest started making little jokes. The men offered their knees to sit on. Clarisse, who couldn't move her elbows, told Vandeuvres that she was counting on him to help her eat. And that Bordenave was taking up a whole place with his chairs! They made a final effort and everyone managed to sit down, but as Mignon remarked very loudly, they were packed like sardines in a tin.

'*Purée d'asperges comtesse*, or *consommé Deslignac*,' breathed the waiters, with their full plates behind the guests.

Bordenave was loudly recommending the consommé when there was a shout. They were protesting and getting annoyed. The door had opened and three latecomers, a woman and two men, had just come in. Oh no, that was the limit! From where she was sitting, Nana half closed her eyes to see if she knew them. The woman was Louise Violaine, but she had never seen the men before.

'My dear,' said Vandeuvres, 'the gentleman is a navy officer, a friend of mine, Monsieur de Foucarmont, whom I invited.'

Foucarmont greeted everybody, not in the least embarrassed, adding:

'And I took the liberty of bringing along a friend.'

'Oh, perfect, perfect,' said Nana. 'Do sit down... Let's see, Clarisse, you move back a little. You have lots of room over there... Now, if we don't mind all squashing up a little...'

They all squeezed up a bit more, Foucarmont and Louise managed to get a tiny corner of the table between them, but the friend had to remain at some distance from his plate. He was eating with his arms stretched out between the shoulders of his neighbours. The waiters cleared away the soup bowls; *crépinettes de lapereaux aux truffes* and *gnocchis au parmesan* were doing the rounds. Bordenave had the whole company up in arms when he told them that for a moment he had thought he might bring Prullière, Fontan, and old Bosc. Nana had adopted her dignified air again. She told him tersely that they would have met with a cold reception. Had she wanted his friends, she would have taken good care to invite them herself. She did not want any theatre people. Old Bosc was always drunk, Prullière was a

show-off, and as for Fontan, when he was at parties, he was unbearable with his loud voice and his stupid remarks. Actors were always out of place in the society of gentlemen like these.

‘Yes, that’s true,’ declared Mignon.

Around the table the gentlemen in question in suits and white ties were dressed very correctly, their pale elegant features still more refined by fatigue. The elderly man made deliberate gestures and smiled discreetly as though he was presiding over a congress of diplomats. Vandeuvres behaved just as he did at the Comtesse Muffat’s, exquisitely polite to his neighbours. Already that morning Nana had said to her aunt that, as far as the men went, these were the best of the bunch. The men were all either noble or rich—chic, in any case. And as for the women, they were on their best behaviour. A few, Blanche, Léa, Louise had come wearing low-cut dresses but it was only Gaga who revealed herself a little too much, and besides, at her age she would have done better not to reveal anything at all. Now that they had finished getting settled, the laughing and joking subsided. Georges was reflecting that he had attended jollier dinners than this one in the homes of the good people of Orléans. There was hardly any conversation, the men who didn’t know anyone else just looked at each other, the women sat without speaking. And that was what Georges found the most astonishing. He thought them rather staid. He had expected them to start kissing right away. As the following course was being served, a Rhenish carp *à la Chambord* and a saddle of venison *à l’anglaise*, Blanche said aloud:

‘Lucy, my dear, I met your son Olivier on Sunday... How he’s grown!’

‘Well, he’s eighteen now,’ replied Lucy. ‘That doesn’t make me feel any younger. He went back to college yesterday.’

Her son Olivier, of whom she spoke with pride, was a student at the naval college. Then they chatted about their children. All the ladies grew emotional. Nana told them of her delight in her baby. Little Louis was now staying with her aunt, who brought him round at about eleven every morning; she took him into her bed, where he played with Lulu, her griffon. You would die laughing to see the two of them burrow deep down under the covers. And you could not imagine how clever Louiset was already.

It was Rose Mignon’s turn to speak. ‘Just imagine, yesterday I was going to fetch Charles and Henri from school; they absolutely insisted I take them to the theatre in the evening, they were jumping around and

clapping their little hands: “We are going to see Maman on stage!” Oh, they were so excited!’

Mignon smiled fondly, his eyes moist with fatherly love.

‘And at the performance,’ he continued, ‘they were so funny, serious as little old men, looking at Rose with eyes like saucers, asking me why Maman’s legs were bare like that.’

The whole table started to laugh. Mignon was triumphant, his pride at being a father was flattered. He adored his children, and his one concern and preoccupation was to increase their fortune by managing, as carefully as any faithful accountant, the money that Rose earned in the theatre and elsewhere. When he had married her, he was leader of an orchestra in a café-concert where she was the singer, and they fell passionately in love. Nowadays they were still good friends. They had a mutual agreement. She worked as hard as she could with all her talents and beauty. He had abandoned his violin to better supervise her career as an artist and as a woman. You would not have found a more bourgeois, or a more united, couple anywhere.

‘How old is the older one?’ Vandeuvres asked.

‘Henri is nine,’ replied Mignon. ‘Ah, he’s a fine boy!’

Then he ventured to say to Steiner, teasing him quietly, for he did not like children, that if he, Steiner, were a father, he would not squander his money in that stupid fashion. While he was talking, he was observing the banker over Blanche’s shoulders to see how things were going with Nana. But for the last few minutes Rose and Fauchery, in close conversation, had been getting on his nerves. He hoped Rose was not going to waste her time on a foolish affair like that. In such cases, dammit, he intervened. And making play with his little finger on which a diamond sparkled, he was getting to the end of his fillet of venison.

The conversation about the children was still going strong. La Faloise, very disturbed by the proximity of Gaga, was asking for news of her daughter whom he had had the pleasure of seeing with her at the Variétés. Lili was in good health but she was still such a child! He was surprised to learn that Lili was nearly nineteen. Gaga became even more impressive in his eyes. And when he enquired why she had not brought Lili along with her, she replied, tight-lipped:

‘Oh no, never! Only three months ago she was determined to leave her boarding school... I was hoping to marry her off straight away, but she is so fond of me I had to let her come back and live at home, much against my will.’

She fluttered her blue eyelids with the blackened lashes while she was talking about the launch of her young daughter in society. If at her age she did not have a sou but was still working and pleasing the men, especially young ones who could have been her grandsons, it was because she considered a good marriage more important. She leaned over to La Faloise, who went hot under the collar beneath the huge bare shoulder plastered in powder that was crushing him.

‘Do you know,’ she murmured, ‘if she goes the same way as me, it won’t be my fault. But the young are so very odd!’

There was a great deal of scurrying to and fro round the table by the waiters. After the first course the entrées had just appeared: *poulardes à la maréchale*, *filets de sole sauce ravigote*, and *escalopes de foie gras*. The maître d’hôtel who had been sending round the Meursault up till then, now offered Chambertin or Léoville.* In the slight buzz occasioned by the changing of the plates, Georges, whose surprise was steadily increasing, asked Daguenet if all these ladies had children. The latter, amused by the question, filled him in. Lucy Stewart was the daughter of a workman, a greaser of English origin at the Gare du Nord. She was thirty-nine, had a face like a horse, but was utterly charming, and despite her consumption, was soldiering on. She was the most chic of these ladies, having had three princes and a duke. Caroline Héquet, born in Bordeaux to an ordinary working-class man who died of shame, had the good luck to have a hard-headed mother who, after first disowning her, had made it up with her again after a year’s reflection, wanting at least to save her fortune. The girl, aged twenty-five, very aloof, passed for one of the most beautiful women, available at a price which never varied. The mother, who was very orderly, kept the books, a strict account of her receipts and expenses, managing the entire household from the little lodging that she lived in two storeys above where she had installed a workshop of seamstresses, for dresses and underclothes. As for Blanche de Sivry, whose real name was Jacqueline Baudu, she came from a village near Amiens. She was a magnificently built woman, but stupid and a liar, claimed she was the granddaughter of a general, and did not admit to her thirty-two years. She was very popular

with the Russians because of her full figure. Then Daguenet said a few quick words about the others: Clarisse Besnus, brought back as a maid from Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer* by a woman whose husband had then launched her into this profession; Simonne Cabiroche, the daughter of a furniture seller from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine,* raised in a large boarding-school to be a governess; and Maria Blond, Louise Violaine, and Léa de Horn all forced out on to the streets of Paris, not to mention Tatan Néné, who had kept cows until she was twenty on some grubby farm in Champagne. Georges listened, looking at the ladies, dazed and excited by this account delivered with such crudeness into his ear, while behind him the waiters repeated respectfully:

'*Poulardes à la maréchale... filets de sole à la sauce ravigote...*'

'My dear fellow,' said Daguenet, who was giving him the benefit of his superior knowledge, 'don't have the fish, it's no good at this time of night and stick with the Léoville, it's not such a killer.'

It was getting hotter from the candelabra, the dishes handed around, and the whole table where thirty-eight guests were longing for some air. And the waiters, forgetting to take care, were rushing around, spilling grease on the carpet. But the meal wasn't getting any jollier. The ladies were picking at the food, leaving half the meat. Only Tatan Néné was tucking heartily into everything. At that advanced hour of the night their appetites were only nervous, their stomachs capricious and unsettled. The elderly man sitting next to Nana was refusing all the dishes he was offered. He had only eaten a spoonful of soup. And he was sitting in silence behind his empty plate, staring around. Everyone yawned discreetly. Occasionally eyelids would close and faces grow sallow. It was ghastly, just like it always was, as Vandeuvres remarked. For such supper parties to be any fun, they had to be less proper. Otherwise, if people were on their best behaviour, one might as well be eating in society, which was no more tedious than this. Without Bordenave bawling away still, they would all be asleep. That brute, Bordenave, with his leg extended comfortably, was letting himself be waited on like a sultan by his neighbours Lucy and Rose. They were solely occupied with him, taking care of him, cosseting him and supervising his glass and plate; which, however, did not stop him complaining.

'Who's going to cut up my meat for me? I can't do it, the table is miles away.'

Simonne continually got up and stood behind him to chop up his meat and bread. All the women took an interest in what he was eating. They

summoned the waiters, and stuffed him fit to burst. Simonne wiped his mouth while Rose and Lucy changed his plate. He appreciated their help, and finally deigned to show he was satisfied by saying:

‘There you are, that’s the ticket, my girl. That’s what women are for.’

They all revived a little and the conversation became general.They were finishing off their mandarin sorbets. The hot roast was a fillet with truffles and the cold roast a galantine of jellied guinea fowl. Nana, who was rather put out by her guests’ lack of enthusiasm, had started to speak very loudly.

‘The Prince of Scotland has already reserved a stage box to see *La Blonde Vénus* when he comes to visit the Exhibition.’

‘I very much hope all the princes will go and see it,’ Bordenave declared, his mouth full.

‘On Sunday we expect the Shah of Persia,’ said Lucy Stewart.

Then Rose Mignon talked about the Shah’s diamonds. He wore a tunic that was entirely covered with precious stones, a real wonder, a flaming star that was worth millions. And the women, pale, their eyes shining with cupidity, leaned forward and cited other kings, other emperors that were expected. They all dreamed of spending a night with a royal that would be paid for with a fortune.

‘Tell me, my dear,’ said Caroline Héquet to Vandeuvres leaning over to him, ‘how old is the Russian Tsar?’

‘Oh, he’s ageless!’ laughed the count. ‘He won’t bother with the likes of you, I can tell you.’

Nana pretended to be offended. This remark sounded unnecessarily harsh. There was a murmur of protest. But Blanche was giving details about the King of Italy whom she had once seen in Milan. He wasn’t in the least handsome but that did not stop him having any woman he wanted, and she was put out when Fauchery told them with authority that Victor Emmanuel wouldn’t be able to come. Louise Violaine and Léa were set on the Emperor of Austria. All of a sudden little Maria Blond piped up:

‘The King of Prussia is a dry old stick! I was at Baden last year. He was always accompanied by the Comte de Bismarck.’

‘Oh yes, Bismarck,’ Simonne interrupted. ‘I knew him. He’s a charming man.’

‘Just what I was saying yesterday,’ cried Vandeuvres. ‘but people didn’t believe me.’

And exactly as at Comtesse Sabine’s soirée, they started talking endlessly about the Comte de Bismarck. Vandeuvres repeated the same conversation. For a moment they were back in the Muffats’ salon, except that the ladies were different. Then on cue they began discussing music. Foucarmont having let something drop about the girl that all Paris was talking about, the one who had taken the veil, Nana was interested and insisted on having every last detail about Mademoiselle de Fougeray. Oh, the poor girl, burying herself alive like that! But if she had a vocation... Around the table the women were very moved. And Georges, exasperated at having to listen to all this a second time, was questioning Daguenet about Nana’s intimate habits, when the conversation inevitably reverted once more to the Comte de Bismarck. Tatan Néné leaned over to ask Labordette in a whisper who was this Bismarck that she didn’t know. Then Labordette, tongue-in-cheek, told her some very tall stories: Bismarck ate raw meat. When he saw a woman near his lair, he carried her off on his back. He had already fathered thirty-two children like that by the age of forty.

‘Thirty-two children by forty!’ cried Tatan Néné, flabbergasted and totally credulous. ‘He must be really exhausted at his age.’

They all burst out laughing, and she realized they were making fun of her.

‘Don’t be so silly! How do I know if you are joking or not!’

Meanwhile Gaga had gone on talking about the Exhibition. Like all the ladies, she was delighted, she was getting ready for it. A good season with the provinces and foreigners rushing to Paris. Well then, perhaps after the Exhibition, if things went well, she could retire to Juvisy* in a little house she’d had her eye on for some time.

‘Well, what do you expect?’ she asked La Faloise. ‘I’m not getting anywhere. If only someone still loved me!’

Gaga was waxing sentimental because she could feel the young man’s knee rubbing against hers. He was very red. She weighed him up with a glance, lisping at him. He was nice, not much of a catch, but she wasn’t fussy nowadays. La Faloise obtained her address.

‘Look at that,’ murmured Vandeuvres to Clarisse. ‘I think Gaga has won over your Hector.’

‘I couldn’t care less!’ the actress replied. ‘He’s stupid. I’ve already chucked him out three times. When children start falling for old women, it

disgusts me.’

She stopped talking to indicate, with a little nod, Blanche, who since the beginning of the dinner had been leaning over in a very uncomfortable position, exposing her bosom to the distinguished old gentleman sitting three places away.

‘You are being abandoned too, my dear,’ she went on.

Vandeuvres smiled his shrewd smile and made a gesture of indifference. He was certainly not going to stop poor Blanche from scoring a success. The spectacle that Steiner was making of himself in front of everybody was interesting him more. The banker was known for his infatuations. This terrible German Jew, a tycoon who dealt in millions, became a complete fool as soon as he fell for a woman. And he wanted them all, not one could appear at the theatre but he bought her, whatever it cost. They talked of huge sums. On two occasions his voracious appetite for women had been the ruin of him. As Vandeuvres used to say, the girls avenged public morality by cleaning him out. A large operation on the Salines des Landes* having given him back his power in the Bourse, the Mignons had been eating a big hole in the finances of the salt marshes. But the bets were on that it would not be the Mignons who would finish the job; Nana was sinking her pearly-white teeth into him. Once more Steiner was ensnared, and caught so tight that he sat as if stunned, eating mechanically, his bottom lip drooping, his face marbled and patchy. She only had to name her price. However, she was in no hurry, she was playing with him, giggling sweet nothings into his hairy ear, enjoying the little shudders that went down his fat face. There would be ample time to fix up this affair if that idiot of a Comte Muffat insisted on acting the puritan.

‘Léoville or Chambertin?’ murmured a waiter, peering round from behind Nana and Steiner at the instant he was whispering to the young woman.

‘Eh, what?’ he stammered, in a daze. ‘Oh, whatever you like, I don’t mind.’

Vandeuvres nudged Lucy Stewart, who had a wicked tongue, and a biting wit when she was provoked. Mignon was exasperating her this evening.

‘You know he’ll be playing gooseberry,’ she said to the count. ‘He’s hoping to replicate what he did with that boy Jonquier, who was with Rose

before he fell for big Laure... Mignon procured Laure for Jonquier, then took him back under his arm to Rose like a husband who has just been allowed a little escapade. But this time it's not going to work. Nana doesn't have to give back the men she borrows.'

'What's the matter with Mignon then, looking so sternly at his wife?' Vandeuvres asked.

Leaning forward, he could see Rose making up to Fauchery. That explained his neighbour's anger. He went on with a laugh:

'Heavens, could you be jealous by any chance?'

'Jealous!' exclaimed the furious Lucy. 'I tell you if Rose fancies Léon, she's welcome to him. He's not worth very much. I get one bunch of flowers a week if that! You see, my friend, these theatre girls are all alike. Rose cried with rage when she read Léon's article about Nana. I know. So, you see, she must have an article about her as well, and she is getting it. I'm going to chuck Léon out, you'll see!'

She broke off to say to the waiter standing behind her with his two bottles:

'Léoville.'

Then lowering her voice, she continued:

'I don't want to shout. I don't do that sort of thing. But all the same she's a bitch. If I were her husband, I'd give her a clout round the ear. Oh, she won't have any luck with him. I know my Fauchery, a dishonest man he is, he sticks to women to establish his position in society. And what society!'

Vandeuvres tried to calm her down. Bordenave, abandoned by Rose and Lucy, was getting cross, shouting that they would let their Papa die of hunger and thirst. That created a welcome diversion. Supper was dragging on. Nobody was eating now. They were pushing the *cèpes à l'italienne* and *croustades d'ananas Pompadour* round their plates. But the champagne they had been drinking ever since they finished their soup was gradually making the guests excited and inebriated. They were getting to the stage where they could not sit up straight. The women had their elbows on the table that was covered with dirty plates. The men had pushed back their chairs to breathe more easily. Dark dress coats set off bright corsages; bare, half-turned shoulders gleamed like silk. It was too hot, the candlelight still spread a dense yellow glow over the table. Occasionally a golden nape bent under a shower of curls, a sparkling diamond earring lit up a high chignon.

There was much joviality, laughing eyes, a glimpse of white teeth, the reflection of the candelabra in a glass of champagne. They told loud jokes, they waved their arms about, asking questions that were left unanswered, calling from one end of the room to the other. But it was the waiters who made the most noise, thinking they were in the corridors of their restaurant, bumping into one another, serving the ices and the dessert with throaty exclamations.

‘Children,’ Bordenave shouted. ‘You know we are onstage tomorrow... Be careful! Don’t overdo the champagne!’

Foucarmont proclaimed: ‘I’ve drunk every wine imaginable from all over the world... Oh, amazing liquors, with alcohol that could kill a man stone dead... Well, it never had any effect on me. I don’t get drunk. I’ve tried, but I just can’t.’

He was very pale, very cool, leaning back on his chair, still quaffing his drink.

‘Never mind,’ said Louise Violaine, ‘stop now, you’ve had enough— it wouldn’t be funny if I had to take care of you for the rest of the night.’

Lucy Stewart’s consumptive cheeks flamed red with the drink, and Rose Mignon, her eyes moist, was waxing sentimental. Tatan Néné, who had eaten too much, was giggling rather hysterically that she had been really stupid. The others, Blanche, Caroline, Simonne, Maria were all chattering, telling one another what they were doing, about their arguments with their coachmen, or about planned trips to the country, or recounting complicated stories about lovers stolen or returned. But one young man sitting near Georges, having tried to kiss Léa de Horn, received a slap with a ‘Hey you, let me go’, full of righteous indignation. And Georges, exceedingly drunk and very excited at seeing Nana, was seriously wondering whether to go down on all fours under the table and curl up at her feet like a little dog. Nobody would have noticed him, he would have kept very quiet. Then at the request of Léa, when Daguenet told the young man to calm down, Georges suddenly felt terribly ashamed as if somebody had just scolded him. It was stupid, it was sad, nothing was nice any more. Daguenet made a joke of it, however, and made him drink a large glass of water, asking him what he would do if he were alone with a woman since three glasses of champagne had laid him out.

‘You know,’ Foucarmont said, ‘in Havana they make a brandy with wild berries. You’d think you were swallowing fire. Well, one evening I drank

more than a litre. It didn’t have any effect on me... And worse than that, another time on the coast of Coromandel,* these savages gave us some concoction of pepper and vitriol. It didn’t have any effect... I just don’t get drunk.’

La Faloise’s expression on the other side of the table had been annoying him for some time. He jeered, he insulted him. La Faloise, his head spinning, was shifting around a lot, snuggling closer to Gaga. But he had grown more agitated and worried. Someone had taken his handkerchief and he was trying to get it back with a drunk’s insistence, questioning those near him, bending down to look under the seats and people’s feet. And as Gaga attempted to calm him down, he murmured:

‘It’s so stupid, it’s got my monogram on one of the corners and that could be compromising.’

‘Tell me, Monsieur Falamoise, Lamafoise, Mafaloise!’ cried Foucarmont, who thought it very witty to go on forever deforming the young man’s name like that.

But La Faloise got angry. He spluttered about his forebears and threatened to fling a carafe of wine at Foucarmont’s head.The Comte de Vandeuvres had to intervene to reassure him that Foucarmont was being quite amusing. And indeed everybody was laughing. That put the befuddled young man off his stride and he sat down again. He ate with a childish obedience when his cousin told him in no uncertain terms to eat. Gaga had pulled him back close again. But from time to time he threw sly, anxious glances at the guests, still wondering where his handkerchief was.

Then Foucarmont, feeling rather witty, laid into Labordette across the whole table. Louise Violaine tried to make him hold his tongue because, she said, when he was like that, teasing other people, it always ended badly for her. He had hit upon a joke which consisted of calling Labordette ‘Madame’. He must have found that very funny, because he kept repeating it while Labordette quietly shrugged and said each time:

‘Be quiet, old chap, you are being silly.’

But as Foucarmont on the contrary started insulting him, for no reason that anyone could fathom, he stopped answering him and addressed himself instead to the Comte de Vandeuvres.

‘Monsieur, please tell your friend to be quiet. I don’t wish to get cross.’

He had fought duels on two occasions. He was acknowledged and received everywhere. They all censured Foucarmont. The whole table was laughing, they thought him very witty, but that was no reason to spoil the evening. Vandeuvres, whose distinguished face was turning the colour of copper, demanded that he withdraw his remarks about Labordette's gender. The other men, Mignon, Steiner, Bordenave, who had also become very loquacious, intervened as well, talking loudly and drowning him out. And only the forgotten elderly man beside Nana still retained his air of superiority and his weary smile, as he silently observed with his pale eyes the debacle that was dessert.

'Shall we have coffee here, my darling?' asked Bordenave. 'It's comfortable here.'

Nana did not reply straight away. Ever since the beginning of the meal, she had not felt at ease in her own house. All these people had overwhelmed and confused her, calling the waiters, shouting, acting as if they owned the place, or as though they were in a restaurant. She herself was forgetting her role as hostess and was only concerned with the fat Steiner who, sitting next to her, seemed near to an apoplectic fit. The curvaceous blonde was listening to him and shaking her head, but giggling provocatively the while. The champagne she had drunk coloured her face pink, her mouth was moist and her eyes sparkled. And the banker was offering her more at every tempting shrug of her shoulders, at the voluptuous slight tensing of her neck when she turned her head. Near her ear, he could see a delicate little patch of a satiny texture which was driving him mad. Nana, somewhat bothered by his attentions, remembered her other guests, trying to be gracious, to show that she knew how to give parties. By the end of the meal she was very drunk. It annoyed her that champagne immediately made her tipsy. Then one thought exasperated her. These ladies behaving so badly in her house were deliberately insulting her. Oh, she could see it all so plainly! Lucy had egged on Foucarmont to have an argument with Labordette while Rose, Caroline, and the others were doing all they could to stir up the men. Now the din was deafening, so they supposed you could behave as badly as they liked at Nana's house. Well, they would see. She may have been a bit drunk but she was still the smartest and most respectable woman there.

Bordenave went on:

'Tell them to serve the coffee here, my darling. I'd rather have it here because of my leg.'

But Nana had got up abruptly, muttering to Steiner and the old gentleman, who was taken aback:

‘Well, that’ll teach me to invite pigs like that.’

Then she pointed to the door of the dining room and added in a loud voice:

‘If you’d like coffee, there’s some in there.’

They left the table and elbowed their way into the dining room, without noticing that Nana was furious. The only one remaining in the salon was Bordenave, holding on to the walls, moving cautiously forward, cursing these bloody women who didn’t care a jot about their Papa now they had filled their bellies. Behind him the waiters were already clearing the table, obeying the shouted orders of the maître d’hôtel. They were rushing, jostling one another, the table was being dismantled like a stage set at the whistle of the stage manager. The ladies and gentlemen were to come back to the salon after having coffee.

‘It’s not so damned warm in here,’ said Gaga with a little shiver as she entered the dining room.

The window of this room had been left open. Two lamps were lighting the table where the coffee, with liqueurs, was served. There weren’t any chairs, they drank the coffee standing up while the racket of the waiters next door increased. Nana had vanished. But nobody was bothered that she had gone. They could do perfectly well without her, they all served themselves, fumbling in the drawers of the sideboard to look for the teaspoons which were missing. Several groups had formed. People who had been separated at supper met up again, and they exchanged looks, meaningful chuckles, comments on various things that had occurred.

‘Monsieur Fauchery must come and have lunch with us one day, mustn’t he, Auguste?’ said Rose Mignon.

Mignon, who was fiddling with his watch chain, briefly cast a stern eye at the journalist. Rose was crazy. As a good manager he would have to put some order into this waste of talent. For an article, maybe; but after that, nothing doing. However, since he knew his wife would sulk and his rule was to allow her, in his fatherly way, to do silly things when necessary, he answered in a kindly way:

‘Of course, I shall be delighted... Come tomorrow, Monsieur Fauchery.’

Lucy Stewart, who was having a chat with Steiner and Blanche, heard the invitation... She raised her voice, saying to the banker:

‘They are all crazy. One of them robbed me, and took my dog as well. Look, my dear, is it my fault if you let her go?’

Rose turned round. She was sipping at her coffee staring at Steiner, very pale, and all the pent-up rage she felt at being dropped by him flashed across her eyes. She could see more clearly than Mignon. It was silly to have tried to restart the affair with Jonquier, those manoeuvres never worked more than once. Too bad! She would have Fauchery, she was stuck on that plan ever since supper and if Mignon didn’t like it, it would serve him right.

‘You are not going to pick a fight?’ Vandeuvres came over to enquire of Lucy Stewart.

‘No, don’t worry. Only make her keep quiet or I shall let her have it.’

And calling Fauchery over with an imperious wave of her hand, she said:

‘Your slippers are at my house, darling. I’ll have them taken to your concierge tomorrow.’

He tried to make a joke of it. She stalked off with a queenly air. Clarisse, who was leaning against the wall to enjoy a quiet glass of kirsch, shrugged. All that fuss about a man! Was it not the case that when two women found themselves together with their lovers, their first thought was to get the other one’s? It was practically the rule! She, for instance, if she had wanted to, might have torn Gaga’s eyes out because of Hector. But she didn’t give a damn. Then, as La Faloise was passing, she made do with the remark:

‘My word, you like them mature, don’t you! Not just ripe, but rotten!’

La Faloise looked very cross. He was still worried. Since Clarisse was making fun of him, he was wary of her.

‘I’m serious,’ he said. ‘You took my handkerchief, give it back to me.’

‘What a bore he is going on about his handkerchief!’ she cried. ‘Look, you idiot, why should I have stolen it?’

‘Well,’ he said mistrustfully. ‘To send it to my family and compromise me.’

Meanwhile Foucarmont was getting stuck into the liqueurs. Still jeering, he glared at Labordette drinking his coffee surrounded by the ladies. And he was muttering disjointedly: he was the son of a horse dealer, other people

said the bastard son of a countess; no income, but always twenty-five louis in his pocket; he ran errands for the whores, but never went to bed with any of them.

‘Never, never!’ he said again, getting angry. ‘No, d’you see, I’ll have to whip the fellow.’

He drained a small glass of chartreuse. Chartreuse did not upset him at all. ‘Not one whit,’ he said, flicking his thumbnail against his teeth. But suddenly, just as he was lurching over to Labordette, he went white and fell over, dead drunk in front of the sideboard. Louise Violaine was most dismayed. She had warned him it would end badly. Now she would have to look after him for the rest of the night. Gaga comforted her, examined the officer with the eye of an experienced woman, declared that it was nothing, that he would sleep like that for twelve or fifteen hours, and he’d be right as rain. They carried Foucarmont off.

‘Goodness, where has Nana got to?’ Vandeuvres asked.

It was true, she had flitted away when she left the table. Everyone suddenly remembered, and asked where she was. Steiner, who had been worried for a while, asked Vandeuvres about the elderly gentleman who had also disappeared. But the count reassured him, he had just taken the old man home; there was no point mentioning his name, he was just a very rich foreigner who took pleasure in paying for suppers. Then they forgot Nana once more and Vandeuvres saw Daguenet poke his head round the door and signal to him to come over. And in the bedroom, the hostess, white-lipped and rigid, was sitting down while Daguenet and Georges were looking at her aghast.

‘Whatever’s the matter?’ he asked.

She did not reply and did not turn her head. He repeated the question.

Finally she cried: ‘I won’t have people making fun of me!’

Then she let rip. She was not an animal, she could see it all as clear as daylight. They had been making fun of her all through supper, they had said dreadful things that proved they thought her beneath them. A load of bitches who weren’t fit to lick her boots! She wasn’t going to go to all that trouble again just to be pulled to pieces like that afterwards! She didn’t know what was stopping her from kicking them all out. And her voice choked with rage, she broke down sobbing.

‘Come now, my dear, you are a little bit drunk,’ said Vandeuvres, beginning to talk to her as though she were a little girl. ‘Be reasonable.’

No, she would not be dissuaded, she was staying there.

‘I may be tipsy, but they have to respect me.’

For a quarter of an hour Daguenet and Georges had been begging her in vain to come back into the dining room. She was adamant, but her guests could do just as they pleased. She despised them too much to go back in there with them. Never, never! They could cut her into little pieces but she wouldn’t leave the bedroom.

‘I should have been more careful,’ she went on. ‘It’s that creature Rose who started the whole thing. I am sure that’s why that very nice lady I was expecting this evening was put off by Rose.’

She was talking about Madame Robert. Vandeuvres gave her his word of honour that Madame Robert had refused on her own account. He was taking her seriously, listening and countering what she said, quite used to scenes like that, knowing how to treat women when they were in that state. But as soon as he tried to catch hold of her hands and pull her off her chair, she fought him off and she was twice as angry. Nobody would ever persuade her that Fauchery had not stopped Comte Muffat from coming this evening. That Fauchery was a real snake in the grass. He hated others’ success, he was capable of persecuting a woman and destroying her happiness. For, finally she knew, the count had got a crush on her. She could have had him if it weren’t for Fauchery.

‘Him, my dear, no never!’ cried Vandeuvres, forgetting himself and laughing.

‘Why ever not?’ she asked, serious, rather more soberly.

‘Because he’s very thick with the priests, and if he were to touch you with the tips of his fingers, he would have to go and confess... You mark my words. Don’t let the other one get away.’

She was silent for a moment, thinking. Then she got up and went to bathe her eyes. But when they wanted to take her back into the dining room she kept on furiously objecting. Vandeuvres left the bedroom with a smile, not insisting any more. And as soon as he had gone, she had an emotional crisis and threw herself into the arms of Daguenet, repeating:

‘Oh, my pet, there is only you... I love you, I do love you... How wonderful it would be if we could live together for ever. My goodness, how

unhappy is a woman's lot!'

Then seeing Georges, who was blushing bright red at the sight of the pair of them kissing, she kissed him too. Mimi couldn't possibly be jealous of a baby. She wanted Paul and Georges to be forever friends because it would be nice to stay like that, all three of them, knowing how fond they were of one another. But a strange noise disturbed them, someone was snoring in the room. Then having looked around, they saw Bordenave who, after his coffee, must have come to settle down in comfort there. He was sleeping on two chairs with his head resting on the edge of the bed and his leg stretched out, his nose twitching at every snore, so she shook with merry laughter. She left the room followed by Daguenet and Georges, and went into the salon, more and more convulsed with giggles.

'Oh Rose, my dear,' she said, almost throwing herself into her arms, 'come and look, you've never seen anything like it!'

All the women had to go and have a look. She stroked their hands, propelled them in, with a burst of such honest merriment that they were all already laughing with her, confident at what they would see. The group vanished, then came back again after holding back their merriment for a minute as they clustered around Bordenave, stretched out there so magisterially. And then they burst into giggles. When one of them bade them be quiet, you could hear Bordenave snoring in the distance.

It was almost four o'clock. In the dining room they had just set up a card table round which Vandeuvres, Steiner, Mignon, and Labordette were sitting. Behind them Lucy and Caroline were chatting, while Blanche, who had not enjoyed the evening and was sleepy, asked Vandeuvres every five minutes if they were going to leave. In the salon they were attempting to dance. Daguenet was playing the piano, 'nice and easy', as Nana said. She hadn't hired a pianist to play because Mimi could play as many waltzes and polkas as they wanted. But they were getting tired of dancing, the ladies were chatting to each other, falling asleep on their sofas. Suddenly there was an almighty noise. A group of eleven young men laughing very loudly in the hall were pushing and shoving at the door to the salon. They had just come from the ball at the Ministry of the Interior in suits and white ties and wearing decorations no one recognized. Nana, cross at this rowdy intrusion, called to the waiters still in the kitchen to throw these gentlemen out, swearing she had never set eyes on them before. Fauchery, Labordette, Daguenet, all the men had moved forward to show support for their hostess.

Insults went flying, fists were raised. For a moment it looked as though there would be a general set-to. But a thin fair lad with a sickly countenance repeated insistently:

‘Come on, Nana, the other night at Peters’,* in the big drawing room... you remember! You invited us...’

The other night? She did not know what he was talking about. Which night was it, for a start? And when the small blond boy told her the day, Wednesday, she definitely remembered having had supper at Peters’ on Wednesday. But she had not invited anybody, she was pretty sure about that.

‘Nevertheless, my girl, if you did invite them...’ muttered Labordette, who was beginning to have his doubts. ‘You may have been a bit merry.’

Then Nana began to laugh. It was possible, she couldn’t remember. Oh well, since the men were there, they might as well come in. Everything settled down, several of the newcomers met up with friends in the salon. And the unpleasant scene ended with them shaking hands. The little fair lad with the sickly countenance turned out to be from one of the noblest families in France. And what’s more, they announced that other people were following. And sure enough, the door opened constantly and men with white gloves in official uniform kept coming in. They were still coming out of the Ministry ball. Fauchery jokingly asked if the Minister himself was coming. But Nana, vexed, replied that the Minister frequented folk who certainly weren’t a patch on her. What she didn’t mention was what she was inwardly hoping for: that she would see Comte Muffat come in with this influx. He might have changed his mind. As she was chatting to Rose, she had one eye on the door.

The clock struck five. No one was dancing now. Only the card players were persisting with their game. Labordette had given up his place, the women had gone back into the salon. The sleepy aftermath of hours of wakefulness weighed more heavily under the flickering lamps whose burnt wicks were reddening the globes. The ladies were at that stage of vague melancholy when they felt the need to talk about their past life. Blanche de Sivry spoke of her grandfather, the general, while Clarisse invented a romantic tale about a duke who had seduced her when she was at her uncle’s where he came to hunt wild boar; and both, sitting with their backs to one another, shrugged their shoulders, asking how in the name of God it was possible to tell such fibs. As for Lucy Stewart, she frankly admitted her

origins, talking willingly about her childhood when her father, a greaser at the Gare du Nord, treated her to an apple turnover on Sundays.

‘Oh! I must tell you!’ cried little Maria Blond suddenly. ‘Living opposite me, there’s a fantastically rich Russian gentleman and yesterday I got a basket of fruit from him. But what fruit! Enormous peaches, grapes as big as this, well, they were extraordinary for the time of year... And in the middle were six thousand-franc notes... It was the Russian... Of course I sent it all back. But I was rather sorry about the fruit!’

The ladies pursed their lips and glanced at each other. That little Maria Blond had some cheek for a girl of her age. As though such things would happen to a kid like her! Among themselves, they were deeply critical of one another. They were especially jealous of Lucy, furious about her three princes. Ever since Lucy had been going horse-riding in the Bois de Boulogne every morning, a habit which had made her reputation, they were all consumed with a passion for horse-riding.

The day was breaking. Nana, hope fading, no longer kept her eyes on the door. They were bored out of their minds. Rose Mignon had refused to sing from *La Pantoufle* and was snuggled up on a sofa whispering with Fauchery, waiting for Mignon who had already won fifty louis from Vandeuvres. A stout, serious gentleman with a medal had just finished reciting ‘The Sacrifice of Abraham’ in an Alsatian dialect. When God swears, he says: ‘In my holy name’ and Isaac always answers ‘Yes, Papa!’ But nobody understood what it was all about and the recitation just seemed silly. They couldn’t think what to get up to in order to finish the night in a suitably jolly fashion. For a moment Labordette thought of denouncing the women to La Faloise, who was lurking around them all to see whether one had his handkerchief hidden down her bosom. Then, as there were still some bottles of champagne left in the sideboard, the young men started drinking again. They called to each other, egged each other on. But inexorably the whole company were overcome by a drunkenness of the most unbelievable stupidity.The fair lad, the one who was of the noblest French family, at his wits’ end, despairing of finding anything amusing to do, had an idea. He carried his bottle of champagne across and emptied it over the piano. All the others doubled up with merriment.

‘Look!’ asked Tatan Néné in surprise. ‘Why is he pouring champagne into the piano?’

‘What, my dear, don’t you know?’ answered Labordette in all seriousness. ‘There’s nothing better for pianos than champagne. It improves the sound.’

‘Ah,’ replied the credulous Tatan Néné.

And because they laughed, she got cross. How was she to know! They were always trying to confuse her.

Things were going from bad to worse. The night was looking as if it would end in disaster. In one corner Maria Blond had come to blows with Léa de Horn whom she accused of going to bed with men who weren’t rich enough. And they had started criticizing one another about their looks. Lucy, who was frankly ugly, made them be quiet. The face didn’t matter, it was the figure which was important. A bit further off on the sofa an attaché from the Embassy had slipped an arm around Simonne’s waist and was attempting to kiss her on the neck. But Simonne, exhausted and grumpy, pushed him away each time with ‘Stop annoying me!’ and hit him hard across the face with her fan. None of the women wanted to be touched, for that matter. Did people suppose they were loose women? Meanwhile Gaga, who had caught up with La Faloise, was practically holding him on her lap, while Clarisse was more or less hidden between two gentlemen and giggling nervously as though she was being tickled. The japes were carrying on around the piano, in a silly, crazy game. They egged each other on, each wanting to pour the dregs into it. It was a nice, easy game.

‘Here you are old chap! Have another drink! God, this piano is thirsty... Here it comes! Here’s another one, mustn’t waste anything.’

Nana didn’t see them because her back was turned... She had now decided to make do with the stout Steiner sitting next to her. Too bad! It was Comte Muffat’s fault if he hadn’t wanted to come. In her white gauzy dress, as light and crinkly as a chemise, and her pale face and dark eyelids showing her slightly tipsy state, compliant now, calmly and good-naturedly she offered herself to him. The roses from her chignon and her corsage had lost their petals; only the stems were left. But Steiner pulled away his hand from her skirts, having just encountered the pins put there by Georges. A few drops of blood appeared. One fell on her dress and stained it.

‘Now it’s signed in blood,’ said Nana seriously.

It was getting light. A ghastly, gloomy dawn was filtering through the windows. Sour and bad-tempered, they began to leave in a disorderly

fashion. Caroline Héquet, cross at wasting her night, said it was time to be off if you didn’t want to witness some rum goings-on. Rose pouted like a compromised woman. It was always like that with these women; they didn’t know how to behave, you could see they were disgusting from the start. And Mignon, having completely cleaned out Vandeuvres, he and his wife, without bothering about Steiner, renewed their invitation to Fauchery for the next day, and left. Then Lucy refused to allow herself to be seen home by the journalist but told him to go back to his slut of an actress. Straight away Rose, who had turned her head, responded with a ‘Filthy bitch!’ between her teeth. But already Mignon, in his paternal attitude to women’s quarrels, superior and experienced, had ushered her out, begging her to have done. Behind them, Lucy went regally downstairs. Then it was Gaga’s turn to take La Faloise off, sick, sobbing like a child and calling for Clarisse who had vamoosed a long time ago with her two men. Simonne had also vanished. Only Tatan, Léa, and Maria were left, and Labordette was happy to take charge of them.

‘I don’t want to go to bed at all, though!’ said Nana. ‘Let’s do something.’

She looked at the sky through the windows, a livid sky with soot-coloured clouds passing over. It was six o’clock. Opposite, on the other side of the Boulevard Haussmann, the houses were still asleep, with their wet roofs outlined against the sky, while down below, a band of street sweepers were going by, their clogs tapping on the empty street. And faced with this desolate awakening in Paris, she was suddenly overwhelmed with a girlish longing for the country, for an idyllic life, for something fresh and clean.

‘Oh, I know what we’ll do,’ she said going over to Steiner, ‘you take me to the Bois de Boulogne and we’ll drink fresh milk.’

She clapped her hands in childish glee. Without waiting for the banker’s reply (for of course he agreed, though in fact he was put out and hoping for something else), she rushed to throw a fur over her shoulders. In the salon, nobody was left except Steiner and the band of young men. But having emptied all the dregs from their glasses into the piano, they were talking about leaving when one of them came rushing up triumphantly, holding a last bottle which he had found in the pantry.

‘Wait! Wait!’ he cried. ‘A bottle of chartreuse! There! This chap needs chartreuse, he’ll feel better after that... Come on, friends, let’s go. We are idiots.’

In the dressing room, Nana had to wake Zoë who had dropped off to sleep on a chair. The gas was burning still. Zoë shivered and helped Madame on with her hat and fur wrap.

‘Well, there you are, I’ve done what you wanted,’ said Nana, speaking familiarly to her in a rush of confidentiality, and relieved to have made up her mind. ‘You were right, the banker is as good as anyone else.’

The maid was in a bad mood, still stiff after her sleep. She grumbled that Madame should have made up her mind the first evening. Then, as she was following her into her bedroom, she asked her what she should do with the other two. Bordenave was still snoring away. Georges, who had slyly come and buried his head in a pillow, had eventually fallen asleep, breathing lightly like a baby. Nana told her to let them sleep. But her mood softened again when she saw Daguenet come in. He was watching out for her in the kitchen, with a melancholy expression on his face.

‘Come now, Mimi, be a good boy,’ she said and took him in her arms, kissing and cajoling him in all manner of ways. ‘Nothing has changed, you know I still love my little Mimi, don’t I? I had to... I swear it’ll be better than ever. Come tomorrow, we’ll fix up a time. Come and kiss me the way you love me... Oh, harder, harder than that!’

And she slipped away, joining Steiner, happy and again wanting to go and drink fresh milk. In the empty apartment the Comte de Vandeuvres remained alone with the beribboned man who had recited ‘The Sacrifice of Abraham’, both of them a fixture at the card table, not knowing where they were any more, unconscious that day had dawned. Blanche had decided to lie down on a sofa to try and sleep.

‘Ah, here’s Blanche!’ cried Nana. ‘We’re going to drink milk, darling, you come too! You’ll still find Vandeuvres here when you come back.’

Blanche got up with a yawn. This time the apoplectic face of the banker paled, much put out by the thought of this great girl who would be very much in the way. But the two women had already got hold of him and were saying:

‘We’re going to see the cow being milked, aren’t we now?’

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CHAPTER 5

At the Variétés it was the thirty-fourth performance of *La Blonde Vénus*. The first act had just finished. In the green room Simonne, dressed as a little laundry girl, was standing in front of the table over which there was a mirror, between the two doors, one in each corner, which opened out on to the passage where all the dressing rooms were. She was all alone, examining her face as she wiped her finger under her eyes to adjust her make-up, while the glare of the gaslights on each side of the mirror warmed her.

'Has he arrived?' asked Prullière, who came in wearing his Swiss admiral costume, with his big sword, enormous boots, and huge plume of feathers.

'Who?' asked Simonne calmly, smiling at herself in the mirror so that she could see her lips.

'The Prince.'

'I don't know. I'm coming down. Oh, he'll be along. He comes every night!'

Prullière had gone over to the mantelpiece opposite the table, where a coke fire was burning in the hearth. Two more gas jets were there, flaring away. He raised his eyes, looked at the clock and the barometer on the right and left, next to some gilt sphinxes in Empire style. Then he stretched out in an immense winged armchair whose green velvet, worn away by four generations of actors, had taken on a yellowish tinge. And he stayed there without moving, staring into the distance with the weary, resigned attitude of actors who are used to waiting for their cue to come onstage.

Old Bosc had also just appeared, shuffling along, coughing, wrapped in an ancient yellow overcoat with one fold slipping off his shoulder, revealing the gold-spangled tabard of King Dagobert. For a moment, after putting his crown on the piano, he walked up and down grumpily though he looked a respectable sort of fellow despite his hands shaking with the signs of incipient alcoholism; a long white beard lent a venerable aspect to his red inebriated face. Then in the silence, as a shower was lashing down on the

panes of the big square window which opened out on to the courtyard, he made a gesture of disgust.

‘What foul weather!’ he grumbled.

Simonne and Prullière did not stir. Four or five pictures, landscapes, a portrait of Vernet the actor, were yellowing in the warmth of the gaslight. On one shaft of a column, a bust of Potier,* one of the former stars at the Variétés, stared out at them with vacant eyes. But suddenly voices were heard. It was Fontan in his Act Two costume, smartly dressed all in yellow and with yellow gloves.

‘Hello!’ he cried, waving his arms about. ‘Guess what? It’s my name day today!’

‘Well, well,’ remarked Simonne who went forward smiling, as if attracted by his big nose and his comical slit mouth. ‘Is your name Achille then?’

‘Right first time! And I’m going to send down an order to Madame Bron for some champagne after the second act.’

For some while a distant bell had been ringing. The long-drawn-out clanging grew fainter and then louder again. And when the bell had ceased to ring, a shout went up and down the stairs, and was lost along the passages: ‘Last call for Act Two! Last call for Act Two!’ That shout got louder, a pale little fellow passed along outside the doors of the green room, where in a hoarse voice, as loudly as he could, he cried: ‘Last call for Act Two!’

‘Champagne, by Jove!’ said Prullière, not appearing to hear the call. ‘That’s going some!’

‘If I were you, I’d order it from the café,’ Old Bosc said slowly. He had sat down on a green velvet-covered bench with his head against the wall.

But Simonne said they had to respect what was on offer at Madame Bron’s. She clapped her hands in excitement, gazing at Fontan, whose goat face—eyes, nose, and mouth—was always mobile.

‘Our Fontan!’ she murmured. ‘He’s a one!’

The two doors of the green room remained wide open on the corridor leading to the wings. Along the yellow wall brightly lit by a gas lamp that was invisible, fleeting silhouettes passed, men in costumes, half-naked women wrapped only in shawls, all the actors who appeared in Act Two, all the riotous fancy-dress from La Boule Noire, and you could hear the

clattering of feet at the end of the passage on the five steps which led down to the stage. As the tall figure of Clarisse went rushing past, Simonne called to her; but she answered that she would be back in a minute. And she did reappear almost immediately in fact, shivering in the thin tunic and scarf of Iris.

‘My God!’ she exclaimed. ‘It’s not warm, and I’ve left my fur in the dressing room!’

Then, standing in front of the mantelpiece toasting her legs, with her leotard shining a bright pink, she went on:

‘The Prince has arrived.’

‘Has he?’ cried the others, curious.

‘Yes, that’s why I ran, I wanted to see... He’s in the first stage box on the right, same as on Thursday. Do you know it’s the third time he’s come this week. What luck for our Nana! I was betting he wouldn’t come again.’

Simonne opened her mouth to speak, but her words were drowned by another shout near the green room. In his reedy voice the call boy shouted as loud as he could into the corridor: ‘They’ve knocked!’

‘He’s been to see her three times, you know,’ said Simonne, when she could make herself heard. ‘Quite exciting! He won’t go to her place, by the way. He takes her to his. And I’ve heard he pays really well.’

‘I bet he does! Out on the town...’ muttered Prullière, getting up and glancing in the mirror to admire the handsome man adored by theatre-goers.

‘They’ve knocked! They’ve knocked!’ The voice of the call boy was getting fainter and fainter as it faded away down the corridors on different floors.

Then Fontan, who knew what had happened on the first occasion when the prince had gone with Nana, recounted the story to the two women snuggling up to him, laughing aloud, when he bent over to fill in certain details. Old Bosc, completely indifferent, had not stirred. That sort of carry-on no longer interested him. He was stroking a fat ginger cat, blissfully asleep curled up on a little bench, and after a while he picked it up and took it in his arms with the tender affection of a doting old king. The cat arched his back; then, after sniffing the long white beard at length and put off no doubt by the smell of the glue, it went back and curled up again on the bench. Bosc remained serious and lost in thought.

‘Do what you like, but if I were you I’d go and have my champagne in the café, it’s better there,’ he said suddenly to Fontan as the latter was getting to the end of his story.

‘We’re on!’ came the drawn-out, piercing voice of the call boy. ‘Onstage, onstage!’

The shout echoed briefly around. The sound of rapid footsteps. A snatch of music, a distant hum, floated through the door to the corridor that was opened abruptly. And there was a soft thud as the padded door closed again.

A deep peace reigned in the green room, as if they were a hundred miles away from that theatre and the clapping audience. Simonne and Clarisse were still talking about Nana. *She* was never in any hurry! Only the day before, she had missed her cue. But they all stopped talking. A tall girl had poked her nose round the door, and then, seeing she had made a mistake, disappeared down the corridor. It was Satin, with a hat and veil, affecting to be a lady making a visit. ‘Trollop!’ muttered Prullière who had seen her hanging round the Café des Variétés all last year. And Simonne recounted how Nana had realized Satin was an old school friend, and had taken her under her wing and badgered Bordenave to launch her career.

‘Ah, greetings!’ said Fontan, shaking hands with Mignon and Fauchery who came in at that moment.

Old Bosc himself held out his fingers while the two women kissed Mignon.

‘Is it a big audience tonight?’ asked Fauchery.

‘Oh, it’s splendid,’ Prullière replied. ‘You should see them lapping it up!’

‘Well, my friends,’ Mignon remarked. ‘You must be on about now?’

Yes, in a little while. They weren’t on till Scene Four. Only Bosc got up with the instinct of an old actor who has trodden the boards and senses his cue coming. And at exactly that moment the call boy appeared at the door.

‘Monsieur Bosc! Mademoiselle Simonne!’ he called.

Rapidly, Simonne flung a fur wrap round her shoulders and left. Bosc went to fetch his crown in a leisurely fashion, adjusting it on his head with a little shove. Then, his cloak trailing behind him, he shuffled off, grumbling with the cross demeanour of a man who has been disturbed.

‘You were very kind to me in your last article,’ Fontan said, addressing himself to Fauchery. ‘But why did you say actors are vain?’

‘Yes, my dear fellow, why did you write that?’ cried Mignon, his huge hands clapping the journalist on his slender back, which shrank beneath them.

Prullière and Clarisse suppressed a laugh. For some time now everyone had been enjoying the drama which was taking place in the wings. Furious at his wife’s affair, and vexed at seeing Fauchery only bringing a rather dubious publicity to their ménage, he had thought he could avenge himself by overwhelming him with signs of friendship. Every night when he met him onstage he slapped him on the back, time and time again, as if carried away by an excess of affection. And Fauchery, cowering before this colossus, had to accept the slaps with a forced smile so as not to be on bad terms with Rose’s husband.

‘Oh, my dear man, you are insulting Fontan,’ said Mignon, carrying on the farce. ‘*En garde!* One, two, and here’s one in the midriff!’

He lunged at the young man with such powerful fists that the latter went pale and was briefly winded. But with a wink, Clarisse pointed out to the others Rose Mignon standing in the doorway. Rose had seen what had gone on. She went straight over to the journalist as if she had not seen her husband. And, raising herself bare-armed in her Baby costume, she put her forehead up against his with a coaxing childish pout.

‘Hello Baby!’ Fauchery said, giving her a familiar kiss.

That was his compensation. Mignon did not even seem to notice the kiss. Everyone in the theatre kissed his wife. But glancing at the journalist, he laughed. Rose’s bravado would surely cost him dear.

In the corridor the padded door opened and shut, sending a storm of applause through to the green room. Simonne was returning from her scene.

‘Old Bosc really made them sit up!’ she exclaimed. ‘The Prince was doubled up with laughter and was clapping along with everyone else, as if he were part of the claque. Tell me, do you know who the tall man is next to the Prince, in the stage box? A fine man, looks very noble, with splendid whiskers.’

‘That’s Comte Muffat,’ Fauchery replied. ‘I know when the Prince was at the Empress’s the day before yesterday, he invited him to dinner this evening. He must have led him astray after that!’

‘So *that’s* Comte Muffat. We know his father-in-law, don’t we, Auguste?’ said Rose addressing Mignon. ‘You know, the Marquis de

Chouard, I went to sing at his house? Yes, that's right, he's in the audience too. I saw him sitting in the back of the box. Now there's an old...'

Prullière who had just been combing his huge plume of feathers turned round to call her.

'Hey Rose, let's go!'

She ran after him, without finishing her sentence. At that moment Madame Bron, the theatre concierge, passed the door with an enormous bouquet in her arms. Simonne asked jokingly if it was for her, but the concierge, without replying, pointed her chin in the direction of Nana's dressing room at the end of the corridor. Oh, that Nana! She was up to her eyes in flowers! Then, as Madame Bron was coming back, she handed a letter to Clarisse who let out a suppressed oath. Not that nuisance La Faloise again! He just wouldn't leave her alone! And when she learned that the gentleman in question was waiting down at the concierge's lodge, she shouted:

'Tell him I'm coming down after this act. I'm going to give him a good smack.'

Fontan had rushed forward:

'Madame Bron, listen... Send up six bottles of champagne in the interval.'

But the call boy had come back, out of breath, and in a sing-song voice:

'Everybody onstage! Monsieur Fontan, you too! Come on, be quick!'

'Yes, all right, Père Barillot, we are on the way,' answered Fontan, somewhat flustered.

And, rushing after Madame Bron, he repeated:

'Six bottles of champagne in the green room, in the interval, if that's all right? It's my feast day, I'm paying.'

Simonne and Clarisse had left with a loud rustle of skirts. Everything went dark. And when the door to the corridor had closed again with a dull thud, you could hear more rain lashing down on the window of the silent green room. Barillot, a sallow little old man who had been a call boy in the theatre for the last thirty years, had gone over to Mignon in a friendly way, offering him his tobacco pouch. This pinch offered and accepted gave him a minute's respite in his continual running up and down the stairs and the corridors to the dressing rooms. He still had to summon Madame Nana, as he called her. But *she* did exactly what she wanted and she didn't give a jot

about the fines. Whenever she felt like missing her cue, she missed it. But he stopped, murmuring:

‘Goodness, she’s ready, here she comes! She must know the Prince has arrived.’

And right on cue Nana appeared in the corridor dressed as the fishwife, arms and face white with two pink blotches under her eyes. She did not come into the room but simply nodded to Mignon and Fauchery.

‘Hello, how are you?’

Mignon was the only one to shake the proffered hand. And Nana went on her way, regally, followed by her dresser who was at her heels bending over to rearrange the folds in her skirt. Then behind the dresser, bringing up the rear of the procession, came Satin, trying to look ladylike but already bored out of her mind with it all.

‘What about Steiner?’ Mignon asked abruptly.

‘Monsieur Steiner left for the Loiret* yesterday,’ Barillot said, returning to the wings. ‘I think he’s going to buy a house in the country.’

‘Ah, I know, a country house for Nana.’

Mignon had grown serious. That Steiner, he had promised to buy Rose a town house in the old days! Still, it didn’t do to fall out with anybody, one should make the best of it. Lost in thought, but as ever retaining his air of superiority, Mignon was walking up and down between the mantelpiece and the little table. Only Fauchery and he were left in the room. The exhausted journalist had just stretched out in the deep armchair, and lay there very quietly with his eyes closed to the stares of the other man who looked down at him as he passed. When they were alone, Mignon did not bother to slap him on the back all the time. What would be the point? Nobody would have been there to enjoy the sight. He was too indifferent to relish himself play-acting the mocking husband. Fauchery, glad of this few minutes’ respite, stretched out his legs in front of the fire, his eyes travelling from the barometer to the clock. While walking up and down, Mignon stopped still in front of the bust of Potier, gazing at it, but not seeing it, and then returned to stand at the window looking down into the dark hollow of the courtyard. The rain had stopped and a deep silence had descended on the room, a silence made still more intense by the fierce heat of the coke fire and the flaming gaslights. Not a sound came from the wings. The stairs and the corridors were dead quiet. It was one of those muffled silences at the end of

an act when the whole cast raises the deafening din of some finale onstage while the empty green room seems to be stifled and falling asleep.

‘Oh, the silly cows!’ Bordenave’s gruff voice boomed all of a sudden.

He had just arrived and was already telling off two actresses who had very nearly measured their length on the stage because they were fooling about. When he spied Mignon and Fauchery, he called them over to show them something. The Prince had just asked if he could go and congratulate Nana in her dressing room in the interval. But as he was taking them there, the stage manager went by.

In a rage Bordenave ordered:

‘Fine those bitches Fernande and Maria!’

Then, calming down and attempting to recover some dignity, as befitted his paternal role, he wiped his face with a handkerchief and added:

‘I am going to receive His Highness.’

The curtain fell in the middle of a long salvo of applause. There was a frantic rush for the wings in the semi-darkness of the stage that was no longer lit by the footlights. The actors and those in walk-on parts hurried off to their dressing rooms while the scene-shifters rapidly changed the set. Meanwhile Simonne and Clarisse had remained at the back, chatting very quietly. Onstage between two of their speeches they had just resolved an affair. Clarisse, having weighed everything up, preferred not to see La Faloise who couldn’t decide whether to leave her for Gaga or not. Simonne was simply going to explain to him that you could not hold on to a woman if you behaved in that clinging fashion. So she was going to put an end to the affair.

Then Simonne, dressed in her laundry-girl costume from the *opéra-comique*, her shoulders covered by a fur, went down the narrow winding staircase with the slippery steps and damp walls leading to the concierge’s lodge. This room, situated between the artistes’ staircase and the administrative offices and having wide walls of glass to right and left, was like a big transparent lantern in which two gas lamps were blazing away. In a pigeonhole, letters and newspapers were piling up. On the table, bouquets of flowers waited beside dirty forgotten plates and an old bodice, whose buttonholes were being mended by the concierge. And in the midst of this disorder below stairs, society gentlemen, gloved, well dressed, were sitting on the four rush-covered chairs, patient and deferential, turning their heads

sharply every time Madame Bron came down from the theatre with a reply. She had just passed a letter to a young man, who had hastened to open it in the hall, under the gas lamp, and who had gone a little pale when he read the classic lines: ‘It’s not possible this evening, darling, I’m busy.’ La Faloise was sitting on one chair at the back between the table and the stove. He seemed to have decided to spend the evening there, but worrying, keeping his long legs out of the way of a whole litter of kittens tumbling around him while the cat sat on her rear and fixed him with her yellow eyes.

‘Oh, is it you, Mademoiselle Simonne, what do you want then?’ asked the concierge.

Simonne asked her to get La Faloise. But Madame Bron could not do so straight away. She kept a sort of deep cubbyhole under the stairs where the walk-on actors could come and refresh themselves with drinks during the intervals and as she had five or six large men in there, still dressed as masked dancers, from La Boule Noire, dying of thirst, and not inclined to wait, she was in something of a flap. The cubbyhole was lit by a gas lamp. You could see a table with a top made of tin and wooden boards covered with opened bottles. When you pulled open the door to this smoke hole, a strong whiff of alcohol came out, mixed with the smell of burnt fat from the concierge’s lodge and the penetrating scent of the flowers left on the table.

‘So,’ the concierge resumed, when she had served the actors, ‘you want that little dark-haired one over there, do you?’

‘No, don’t make me laugh!’ said Simonne. ‘It’s the skinny one next to the stove—your cat is sniffing his trousers.’

And she bore La Faloise off into the hall, while the other gentlemen, stifled, suffocating, resigned themselves to waiting, and the masked actors all along the steps of the stairs were getting very drunk, bawling and slapping each other on the back.

Up onstage Bordenave was getting angry with the scene-shifters who were taking a long time to change the set. It was deliberate, the Prince was going to get some farm set or other on his head.

‘Push, push!’ cried the chief scene-shifter.

Finally the curtain at the back rose and the stage was clear. Mignon, watching Fauchery, seized the occasion to start attacking him again. He flung his arms around him crying:

‘Watch out! That pole almost crushed you!’

And he lifted him out of the way and gave him a shake before putting him back on his feet. In front of the exaggerated laughs of the scene-shifters, Fauchery went white. His lips trembled and he was just about to lose his temper when Mignon came over all good-natured and slapped his back affectionately, making Fauchery flinch. He kept saying:

‘It’s only because I care about your well-being! My God, I would look foolish if I got you into trouble!’

But there was a sudden murmur of: ‘The Prince, the Prince!’ And everyone turned to gaze at a small door at the side of the theatre. So far you could only see the rounded shoulders of Bordenave, with his butcher’s neck, bowing and scraping in a series of obsequious greetings. Then the Prince appeared, tall, strong, with a fair beard and rosy complexion; a solid-looking confident bon viveur of a man whose square frame could be seen beneath the impeccable cut of his frock coat. Behind him walked Comte Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard. This part of the auditorium was in shadow, the group was indistinct amongst the tall moving shapes. Bordenave, tremulous with a false emotion, had adopted the tone of a showman exhibiting a bear to speak to the son of a queen, the heir to a throne. He kept on saying:

‘If Your Highness cares to follow me... Would Your Highness be so good as to come this way... Your Highness should take care...’

The Prince took his time, very interested, stopping awhile instead to look at what the scene-shifters were doing. They had just pulled down a batten and the projectors hanging in their wire mesh were illuminating the stage in a broad beam. Muffat especially, who had never until now visited the wings of a theatre, was astonished and felt uneasy, a vague distaste that was mixed with fear. He raised his eyes to the flies where other battens, whose lights had been dimmed, gleamed like so many constellations of little bluish stars amid the chaos of the grid, wires of every size, painters’ cradles, and backcloths spread out in the air like huge sheets hung out to dry.

‘Lower away!’ cried the chief scene-shifter suddenly.

And the Prince himself had to warn the count. A cloth was descending. They were putting in place the decor for Act Three, the cave on Mount Etna. Some were putting poles into metal frames, others were going to fetch the frames from against the sides of the stage and were coming to attach them to the poles with strong rope. At the back, to produce the flames in the

blazing forge of Vulcan, a man in charge of lights had fixed a stand and was lighting some gas lamps in their red glass shades. It was very confused, it looked as if everyone was pushing and shoving but in fact every little movement was regulated. Meanwhile, in all the hustle and bustle the prompt was taking small steps back and forth to stretch his legs.

‘Your Highness is most gracious,’ said Bordenave, bowing again. ‘The theatre is not big, we do what we can... Now if Your Highness would care to follow me...’

Already Comte Muffat was moving in the direction of the dressing rooms. The fairly steep slope of the stage had taken him by surprise and his unease was largely on account of this floor which he felt to be unstable under his feet. Through the open frames you could see the gas jets burning down below. It was like a subterranean existence down there in the dark depths, men’s voices sounding as if they were ascending from a cave. But as he was coming up again, something stopped him in his tracks. Two girls in costume for the third act were chatting in front of the peephole in the curtain. One of them, with her hips stuck out and widening the hole with her fingers to see better, was searching for somebody in the audience.

‘I can see him,’ she said suddenly. ‘Oh, what a face!’

Bordenave was scandalized and just managed not to land her a kick in the backside. But the Prince was laughing, he seemed happy and excited to have heard those words, and couldn’t take his eyes off the girl who didn’t give a jot about His Highness. She was laughing brazenly. Meanwhile Bordenave had persuaded the Prince to follow him. Comte Muffat, sweating profusely, had just removed his hat. He especially disliked the stuffy atmosphere, thick and overheated, the stink, the stench of gas in the wings, the glue of the sets, the filthy dark corners, the dubious undergarments of the minor actresses. In the corridor it was even more suffocating: the occasional sharp scents of toilet water, the smells of soap wafting down from the dressing rooms, reached him through the fug of human breath. As he passed, the count raised his head and glanced up at the stairwell, startled by the sudden flood of light and heat falling on the back of his neck. From above came the sound of people washing in sinks, laughing and calling, and a row of doors, continually banging, emitted a female scent, the musk of the make-up mixed with the strong animal smell of hair. And he did not stop, he hastened his step, as though he were escaping, taking with him on his skin the thrill of that opening into a passionate world he knew nothing about.

‘It’s curious, a theatre, isn’t it?’ remarked the Marquis de Chouard, with the delighted air of a man who feels completely at home there.

But Bordenave had just reached Nana’s room at the end of the corridor. He quietly turned the knob; then, standing aside, said:

‘If Your Highness would care to go in...’*

A surprised female voice cried out and there was Nana, naked to the waist, escaping behind a curtain, while her dresser, in the process of drying her, stood holding a towel.

‘Oh, how stupid of you to come in like that!’ cried Nana from her hiding place. ‘Don’t come in, you can see people can’t come in.’

Bordenave seemed rather put out by her vanishing act.

‘My dear girl, stay as you are, it doesn’t matter,’ he said. ‘It’s His Highness. Come now, don’t be such a baby.’

And as she refused to show herself, still shaken, yet already starting to laugh, he added in a gruff, paternal tone:

‘These gentlemen know what a woman looks like, for heaven’s sake. They won’t eat you.’

‘I’m not so sure of that!’ added the Prince, wittily.

Everyone began to laugh in an exaggerated way, to flatter him. A delightful witticism, so completely Parisian, as Bordenave remarked. Nana did not answer, the curtain moved, no doubt she was making up her mind to come out. Then Comte Muffat, blushing red, examined her room. It was square with a very low ceiling, furnished entirely in a light havana material. The curtain was of the same stuff, held up by a brass curtain rod, and created a sort of separate small room at the back. Two large windows looked out on to the theatre yard, almost three metres away from a flaking wall on which in the darkness of night the panes threw yellow squares of light. A huge cheval glass stood opposite a washstand of white marble decorated with an untidy row of bottles and glass jars for oils, essences, and powders. The count went over to the mirror, saw how red he was, small beads of sweat on his forehead. He lowered his eyes and came to stand in front of the washstand where the sink, full of soapy water and littered with little ivory utensils and damp sponges, seemed to absorb him for a moment. The dizziness he had felt at his first visit to Nana’s apartment in the Boulevard Haussmann came over him again. He felt the thick carpet of the dressing room give softly beneath his feet. The gaslights which were

burning over the washstand and the cheval glass sent small hissing flames around his temples. For one moment, fearing he might faint in this female scent, here again, only warmer and ten times more pungent because of the low ceiling, he sat down on the padded sofa between the two windows. But he got up again immediately, returned to the washstand, did not look at anything, his eyes unseeing, and was reminded of a bouquet of tuberoses which had died in his room once upon a time and which had nearly killed him. When tuberoses decompose, they have a human odour.

‘Hurry up then!’ ordered Bordenave, peeping round the curtain.

The Prince for his part was listening graciously to the Marquis de Chouard, who, taking the hare’s paw off the washstand, was explaining how one applied greasepaint. In a corner, Satin, with her pure virginal face, was watching the gentlemen, while the dresser, Madame Jules, was getting Venus’ leotard and tunic ready. Madame Jules was ageless, her face was the colour of parchment with those unchanging features of spinsters no one had ever known young. This lady had withered away in the overheated air of the dressing rooms, amid the most famous thighs and bosoms in Paris. She wore the same faded black dress and on her flat, sexless chest was stuck a forest of pins where her heart was.

‘My apologies, gentlemen,’ said Nana, pulling back the curtain. ‘I was taken by surprise...’

They all turned. She had not put on anything at all, she had just buttoned up a little percaline bodice which was half covering her breasts. When these gentlemen had caused her to hide, she had scarcely taken off any clothes, just quickly removed her fishwife costume. On her back a small fraction of her chemise was showing above her camiknickers. And with bare arms, bare shoulders, her nipples showing, she stood there blonde, plump, adorable in her youthfulness, one hand still holding the curtain as though to draw it over her again at the slightest alarm.

‘Yes, I was taken by surprise,’ she stammered, affecting embarrassment, smiling awkwardly, her neck a becoming shade of pink. ‘I would never dream of...’

‘Come, come,’ cried Bordenave. ‘We think you look perfect!’

She risked a few more hesitant ingénue expressions, wriggling around as though being tickled, and repeating:

‘Your Highness is too gracious... I beg Your Highness to forgive me if I receive him like this...’

‘I am the one intruding,’ said the Prince. ‘But I could not resist the opportunity of congratulating you...’

Then, calmly, she walked between the two gentlemen to the washstand in her camiknickers and they moved aside to let her pass. She had very solid thighs, the knickers showed off her bottom, while, with her breasts stuck out, she greeted her visitors, smiling sweetly. Suddenly she seemed to recognize Comte Muffat and held out her hand to him in a friendly way. Then she scolded him for not having come to her supper party. His Highness was pleased to tease Muffat, who stammered, shuddering at having held her little hand, cool from washing, for a split second, in his own burning fingers. The count had eaten a hearty dinner at the Prince’s place, the latter being a great gourmet and drinker. Both were indeed even a little tipsy. But they comported themselves well enough. All that occurred to Muffat to say, to hide his emotion, was that it was rather warm.

‘Goodness, how stuffy it is!’ he said. ‘How do you manage to exist in such a temperature, Madame?’

And the conversation was about to take off from that point when loud voices were heard at the door to her room. Bordenave uncovered a grille such as you find in convents. It was Fontan, followed by Prullière and Bosc, all carrying bottles under their arms and copious glasses in their hands. He knocked before proclaiming that it was his feast day and the champagne was on him. Nana had given the Prince a questioning look. But of course! His Highness had no wish to spoil the party, he would be very happy indeed to oblige. But without waiting for permission, Fontan came in, lisping, repeating:

‘I’m no miser, the champagne is on me.’

Abruptly he noticed the Prince, whom he had not expected there. He stopped short, and affected a tone of solemn clownishness, saying:

‘King Dagobert is out in the passage wishing to have a drink with His Royal Highness.’

The Prince smiled, and then everyone thought this delightful. However, the room was too small for all these people. They had to squeeze up, Satin and Madame Jules at the back against the curtain, the men squashing together around the half-naked Nana.The three actors still had their Act Two

costumes on. While Prullière was taking off his Swiss admiral costume, for his huge plume of feathers would not have fitted under the ceiling, Bosc, with his purple tabard and his tin crown, steadied himself on his teetering legs and greeted the Prince like a monarch who receives the son of a neighbouring power. They raised their brimming glasses.

‘I drink to Your Highness!’ said old Bosc with a royal gesture.

‘To the Army!’ Prullière added.

‘To Venus!’ cried Fontan.

Amiably the Prince raised his glass. He waited, raised his glass three times, and murmured:

‘Madame... Admiral... My Lord...’

And he drank it straight off. Comte Muffat and the Marquis de Chouard did likewise. It was no longer a joke, they were at Court. This world of the theatre recreated the real world in a solemn farce beneath the flame of the gaslights. Nana, forgetting she was wearing only her camiknickers and her tiny bodice, was playing the part of the great lady, Queen Venus, throwing open her little apartments to the heads of state. Into each sentence she threw in the words ‘Royal Highness’, made accomplished curtseys, treated the shambling Bosc and Prullière as if one were a sovereign and the other his minister. And nobody thought this was an odd mixture—the real prince, the heir to a throne, drinking an actor’s champagne and very much at ease in this carnival of the gods, in this masquerade of royalty, in the midst of a crowd of dressers and whores, showmen and pimps. Bordenave, excited by this scenario, was thinking about the things he could put on his bill of fare were His Highness to deign to appear in that way in the second act of *La Blonde Vénus*.

‘I know,’ he exclaimed, waxing informal. ‘Let’s get my girls down here.’

Nana did not like the idea, but she was letting herself be persuaded. Fontan attracted her with his grotesque features. Rubbing herself up against him, and gazing at him like a pregnant woman who craves something she shouldn’t eat, she suddenly addressed him familiarly.

‘Come on, give me some, you monster!’

Fontan refilled the glasses and they drank, repeating the same toasts.

‘To His Highness!’

‘To the Army!’

‘To Venus!’

But Nana commanded silence with a wave of her hand. She raised her glass very high and said:

‘No, no, to Fontan! It’s his name day. To Fontan, to Fontan!’

Then they clinked glasses for a third time and raised a cheer for Fontan. The Prince, who had seen the young woman devouring the comic actor with her eyes, saluted him.

‘Monsieur Fontan,’ he said with exquisite politeness, ‘I drink to your success.’

Meanwhile the back of His Highness’s dress coat was brushing against the marble washstand. It was like a deep recess, a narrow washroom with the steamy sink and the sponges, the strong perfume of essences mixed with the sharp whiff of alcohol from the champagne. The Prince and Comte Muffat, with Nana squashed between them, had to raise their hands so as not to rub against her bottom or her breasts if they moved ever so slightly. And Madame Jules, without one drop of perspiration on her face, waited stiffly, while Satin, used to a life of vice, was nonetheless astonished to see a Prince and gentlemen in suits consorting with a bunch of actors around a naked woman, and thought to herself that classy folk were not so clean-living as all that after all.

But in the passage the ringing of Père Barillot’s bell was getting more insistent. When he appeared at the door of the dressing room, and saw the three actors still in their costumes from Act Two, he panicked.

‘Oh, gentlemen, gentlemen,’ he stammered, ‘hurry! The bell has just rung in the theatre foyer.’

‘Pah,’ said Bordenave, unflustered, ‘the public can wait.’

All the same, after more greetings and as the bottles were empty, the actors went up to get changed. Bosc, his beard soaked in champagne, had just removed it; without this venerable beard the drunkard suddenly reappeared with the ravaged and bruised face of an old alcoholic actor. You could hear him at the foot of the stairs, saying to Fontan in his rasping tones, speaking of the Prince:

‘I impressed him, didn’t I!’

The only persons remaining in Nana’s dressing room were His Highness, the count, and the marquis. Bordenave had gone off with Barillot, advising him not to give the three knocks without warning Madame.

‘Excuse me, gentlemen,’ said Nana, starting to do her arms and face again, preparing especially for the nude scene in Act Three.

The Prince sat down on the sofa with the Marquis de Chouard. Only Comte Muffat remained standing. The two glasses of champagne in this suffocating heat had added to their inebriation. Satin, seeing the gentlemen closeted with her friend, had decided she had better disappear discreetly behind the curtain. And she perched there on a trunk, annoyed at having to wait while Madame Jules came and went calmly without a word or glance.

‘You sang your number wonderfully well,’ said the Prince.

Then the conversation got going but with short sentences interspersed by silences. Nana could not always reply. After putting cold cream over her arms and face, with her hands, she spread the greasepaint using a corner of a towel. For a moment she stopped looking at herself in the mirror, she stole a glance at the Prince and smiled without relinquishing the greasepaint.

‘Your Highness flatters me,’ she murmured.

The procedure was complicated, but the Marquis de Chouard followed every gesture with a look of blissful delight on his face. It was his turn to speak.

‘Could the orchestra not accompany you more softly?’ he said. ‘It drowns out your voice, and that’s an unforgivable crime.’

This time Nana did not turn her head. She had taken the hare’s foot and was passing it lightly over her face, very carefully, bent over the washstand in such a way that you could see the taut white curve of her knickers below the edge of her chemise. But she wanted to show that she appreciated the old man’s compliment and wiggled her hips.

Silence reigned. Madame Jules had noticed a tear in the right leg of the camiknickers. She took a pin from the front of her dress, kneeled for a moment on the floor busying herself at Nana’s thigh, while the young woman, without appearing to notice she was there, coated her face with rice powder, carefully avoiding putting any on her cheekbones. But when the Prince said that if she came to sing in London the whole of England would want to applaud her, she gave him an amiable smile, turned round a second, her left cheek very white in the cloud of powder. Then she suddenly grew serious. She had to put on some rouge. Again, with her face close to the mirror, she dipped her finger in a pot, applied the rouge below her eyes, spread it gently out to her temples. The gentlemen kept a respectful silence.

Comte Muffat had still not said a word. He could not help thinking of his young days. When he was a boy his bedroom was very cold. Later, when he was sixteen and kissed his mother each evening, he carried with him her icy embrace into his sleep. One day as he passed a half-open door he had caught sight of a maidservant washing herself. And that was the only memory that had disturbed him, from his adolescence to his marriage. He had found in his wife a strict obedience to her wifely duties. He himself felt a sort of religious repugnance about it. He grew up, he grew old, ignorant of the flesh, focused on rigid religious practices, regulating his life in accordance with moral precepts and rules. And suddenly there he was in this actress's dressing room in front of this naked girl. He who had never seen Comtesse Muffat so much as put on her garters, was suddenly flung into the intimate details of a woman's toilet, in the untidy mess of pots and bowls, into the very middle of this strong, sweet perfume. His whole being revolted, he was terrified by the way Nana had for some time now been slowly invading his consciousness and taking hold of him, reminding him of the pious texts, the stories of possession by the Devil on which he had been reared. He believed in the Devil. In a confused way, Nana *was* the Devil, her laughter, her bosom, her bottom, she was swollen with vice. But he promised himself he would be strong. He would be able to fend her off.

'So, it's agreed then,' said the Prince, very much at ease on the divan, 'you'll come to London next year and we shall give you such a welcome, you'll never want to return to France again! You see, my dear count, you don't show your pretty women off enough. We shall take them all away from you.'

'That won't bother him at all,' muttered the marquis wickedly, risking a little intimacy. 'The count is virtue personified.'

Hearing him spoken of as virtuous, Nana gave him such a funny look that Muffat was quite put out. Then this feeling surprised him and he was cross with himself. Why did the idea of being virtuous bother him in relation to this girl? He could have struck her. But Nana, trying to find a brush for her face, had just let it drop. And as she bent down, he rushed to pick it up, their breath mingled, the hair of Venus tumbled down on to his hands. It was a delight mixed with remorse, one of those delights that the fear of hell in the practising Catholic spurs on to commit a sinful act.

At that moment Père Barillot's voice was raised behind the door.

‘Madame, may I give the knocks? They are getting impatient in the audience.’

‘In a minute,’ Nana replied unconcernedly.

She had soaked the brush in a jar of kohl. Then, her nose to the mirror, shutting her left eye, she applied it delicately between her eyelashes. Muffat watched from behind. He saw her reflection in the mirror with her curving shoulders and her bosom sunk in a rosy shadow. And he could not, try as he might, take his eyes off that dimpled face with one eye closed, which looked so provocative, as though she was swooning with desire. When she shut her right eye and applied the brush, he knew he was hers.

‘Madame,’ the call boy shouted again, out of breath. ‘They are stamping their feet, they will be smashing up the seats before long. May I knock?’

‘Bother them,’ said Nana, impatiently. ‘Knock if you must, I don’t care! If I’m not ready, they’ll have to wait, that’s all.’

She calmed down and added with a smile, turning to the gentlemen:

‘Honestly, they don’t let us have a minute to chat!’

Now her face and her arms were done. With her fingertips she added two wide strokes of carmine to her lips. Comte Muffat felt even more troubled, seduced by the perverse attractions of powders and creams and seized with an uncontrollable desire for this painted young woman, with that mouth that was too red, that face that was too white, those eyes which looked bigger and had black circles round them, as if bruised by love. However, Nana dodged behind the curtain for a moment to put on her Venus costume, after taking off her camiknickers. Then, calmly and unashamedly, she came out to unbutton her little percaline bodice, holding out her arms to Madame Jules who handed her the short-sleeved tunic.

‘Quick, they are getting cross!’ she urged.

The Prince with half-closed eyes studied the swell of her bosom, like a connoisseur, while the Marquis de Chouard nodded involuntarily. Muffat stared at the carpet so as not to see. Anyway Venus was ready, wearing only that simplest of gauze on her shoulders. Madame Jules was fussing around her looking like a little old lady made of wood, with vacant bright eyes. And she briskly took pins out of the inexhaustible pincushion of her heart, fastening Venus’ tunic, rubbing against all that fresh naked flesh with her dry hands, without sparing a thought for her sex and as though it was no concern of hers.

‘Done!’ said the young woman, giving herself one last glance in the mirror.

Bordenave was coming back, hot and bothered, saying that Act Three had begun.

‘I’m coming,’ she continued. ‘What a fuss! I’m the one who’s always waiting for other people.’

The gentlemen left the dressing room for now, but would be back. The Prince had expressed the desire to be there for Act Three, in the wings. Left on her own, Nana looked round in surprise.

‘Where’s she gone then?’ she asked.

She was looking for Satin. When she discovered her behind the curtain, waiting on the trunk, Satin calmly replied:

‘I didn’t want to get in your way, with all those men around.’

And she added that she was leaving. But Nana stopped her. How silly to behave like that now that Bordenave had agreed to take her on! They would finalize the arrangements after the show. Satin hesitated. All these machinations, it wasn’t her kind of thing. But she stayed nonetheless.

As the Prince was going down the little wooden staircase, a strange sound of stifled oaths and scuffles erupted from the other side of the theatre. The incident scared the actors waiting for their cue. For a while Mignon had been enjoying his joke again, showering Fauchery with affection. He had just invented a little game, flicking Fauchery’s nose, to keep the flies off, he said. Naturally the actors found the game hilarious. But suddenly Mignon, carried away with his success and throwing himself into the realms of fantasy, had given the journalist a slap, a good, strong slap across the face. That time he went too far. Fauchery could not put up with a blow like that in front of everyone and still pretend it was funny. The two men stopped their little game and their faces livid with rage, leapt at each other’s throats. They rolled around on the floor behind a screen, calling each other pimp.

‘Monsieur Bordenave, Monsieur Bordenave!’ the stage manager called in alarm.

Bordenave followed him, having excused himself to the Prince. When he saw that it was Fauchery and Mignon on the floor, he allowed himself to show his irritation. They really were a waste of time, and with His Highness on the other side of the set! Everybody could hear them! He grew even more cross when Rose Mignon arrived out of breath just at the instant she

was to appear onstage. Vulcan was giving her the cue. But Rose was flabbergasted when she saw her husband and lover sprawling on the floor, their hands at each other's throats, attacking one another, pulling each other's hair out, and making their coats all white and dusty. She couldn't climb over them. And then, unbelievably, a stagehand had had to catch Fauchery's hat at the moment when in the struggle the wretched thing was about to bounce on to the stage. Meanwhile, Vulcan who was ad-libbing to keep the audience amused, gave her the cue again. Rose, still looking at the two men, was rooted to the spot.

'Well, don't keep staring at them!' Bordenave muttered angrily at the back of her neck. 'Go on! Go on! It doesn't concern you! You'll miss your cue!'

And with a push from him, Rose, stepping over their bodies, found herself onstage in the glare of the footlights, facing the public. She could not understand why they were on the floor fighting. Trembling and with her head spinning, she went down towards the front of the stage in the role of Diana, and with her lovely amorous smile launched into the first line of her duet with such enthusiasm that the public gave her an ovation. Behind the set she could hear the muffled blows of the two men. They had rolled over as far as the proscenium arch. Luckily the music concealed the noise of the lunges they were making behind the flats.

'For God's sake!' cried Bordenave in exasperation, when he had finally managed to prise them apart. 'Can't you keep your fights for when you're home? You know very well I don't like people fighting. You, Mignon, are going to do me the favour of staying this side, by the courtyard. And you, Fauchery, I'll kick you out of the theatre if you leave this side, the garden. That clear? Courtyard and garden,* or I'll forbid Rose to bring you.'

When he returned to the Prince, the latter asked what the matter was.

'Oh, nothing much,' he answered calmly.

Nana, standing, wrapped in a fur, was waiting for her entrance, chatting to the gentlemen. As Comte Muffat was going up again to glance at the stage between two of the flats,* he realized from the stage manager's gesture that he had to walk quietly. There was a warm peaceful atmosphere under the beams. In the wings which were illuminated by bright patches of light, a few odd characters talking in low voices were standing or tiptoeing around. The man in charge of the gaslights was at his post, near the complex arrangement of taps. A fireman, leaning against a frame, tried to

see what was going on, peering out; while, right at the top on his bench, the man in charge of the curtain was watching with a resigned expression, indifferent to what was going on onstage, still waiting for the bell before manipulating his ropes. And in this stuffy atmosphere, beyond the tiptoeings and whisperings, the voices of the actors onstage reached him as muffled and distorted, sounding strangely artificial. More distant, beyond the confused notes of the orchestra, you could hear something like a huge intake of breath as the audience broke into occasional murmurs, laughter, or applause. You could sense the public there without seeing them, even when they were silent.

‘Something is open,’ Nana said suddenly, pulling the corners of her fur wrap around her. ‘Barillot, go and have a look. I bet somebody has opened a window. We could die of cold in this place.’

Barillot swore he had shut everything himself. Maybe there were some broken panes. Actors were always complaining of draughts. In the airless warmth of the gas there were sudden blasts of cold air, a real breeding ground for chest problems, as Fontan remarked.

‘I’d like to see you wearing a low-necked costume,’ Nana insisted, getting cross.

‘Hush!’ muttered Bordenave.

Onstage Rose was singing a line from her duet with such attention to her phrasing that the bravos drowned out the orchestra. Nana stopped complaining, her expression serious. Meanwhile the count was brave enough to venture down a passage, when Barillot stopped him, warning him he would be visible to the audience. He could see the set from behind and at an angle, the back of the structures reinforced by a thick layer of old posters, and also part of the stage, the cave of Etna hollowed out of a silver mine with Vulcan’s forge in the distance. The battens, now lowered, were lighting up the glitter paint which had been applied with thick brush strokes. Blue and red glass panes placed alternately gave the impression of flames from a brazier, while right at the back of the stage gas jets at floor level threw a line of black rocks into relief. And there, on a gently sloping platform in the midst of those droplets of light, looking just like fairy lights scattered around the grass on an evening of a public festival, old Madame Drouard who was playing Juno was sitting, dazed and sleepy, waiting for her cue.

But suddenly there was a stir. Simonne, in the middle of listening to one of Clarisse's stories, said:

'Well, well, if it isn't La Tricon!'

It was indeed La Tricon, her hair plaited and looking rather like an aristocratic lady doing the rounds of the lawyers. When she saw Nana, she walked straight over to her.

'No,' said Nana, after a rapid exchange of words. 'Not now.'

The old lady looked grave. Prullière went by, giving her a handshake. Two little girls with minor acting parts were gazing at her, in awe. She seemed to hesitate one moment and then the rapid exchanges began again.

'All right,' Simonne said finally. 'In half an hour.'

But as she was going back to her dressing room, Madame Bron, who was again walking around with letters in her hand, passed her one. Bordenave, dropping his voice, was furiously scolding the concierge for letting La Tricon through the door. That woman! It *would* have to be this evening! He was indignant because of His Highness. Madame Bron who had been in the theatre for thirty years, answered him tartly. How was she to know? La Tricon did business with all these ladies. The director had seen her here a score of times without saying anything. And while Bordenave was swearing under his breath, La Tricon was calmly staring at the Prince like a woman who is sizing up a man. A smile broke out on her sallow face. Then she walked slowly away through the group of respectful girls.

'At once, if you will?' she said, turning to Simonne.

Simonne seemed very cross. The letter was from a young man whom she had made a promise to for this evening. She gave Madame Bron a scrawled note which read: 'I can't this evening, darling, I am busy.' But she was worried; that young man would perhaps be waiting for her anyway. As she wasn't in Act Three, she wanted to leave straight away. So she asked Clarisse, who wasn't on till nearly the end of the act, if she would go and look. And while Clarisse did that, Simonne went briefly back up to the dressing room they shared.

Down below in Madame Bron's little bar, a minor actor in the role of Pluto was drinking alone, draped in a capacious red robe with golden flames on it. The concierge must have been doing a good trade because the cubbyhole under the stairs was all damp with the spilt water from the rinsed glasses. Clarisse raised her Iris tunic which was trailing on the slippery

steps. But, prudently, she halted and was content to peer out as she turned the corner in the stairs and glanced into the lodge. And she was right to do so. For wasn't that idiot of a La Faloise still there on the same chair, between the table and the stove! He had pretended to be leaving when he saw Simonne, then he came back again. In any case the lodge was still full of gentlemen, with gloves on, well dressed, obedient and patient. They were all waiting, looking at each other with sombre expressions on their faces. On the table there were only dirty plates, Madame Bron had distributed the remaining bunches of flowers; just one fallen rose was wilting, near the black cat which had curled up to sleep while the kittens were gambolling about, darting wildly in and out of the gentlemen's legs. For a moment Clarisse felt like kicking La Faloise out. That idiot did not care for animals, that was him all over! He kept his elbows in because of the cat so that he wouldn't have to touch her.

'Be careful, she'll bite you!' said the joker, Pluto, who was coming back up, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

Then Clarisse abandoned the idea of having a row with La Faloise. She had seen Madame Bron give the letter to Simonne's young man. The latter had gone to read it beneath the gas lamp in the hall. 'I can't this evening, darling, I'm busy.' And calmly, no doubt used to the phrase, he had disappeared. There, at least, was someone who knew how to behave! Not like others who insisted on sitting there on those tatty straw chairs in that great smelly glass cage where you died of heat. Fancy men willing to put up with all that! Clarisse went upstairs again, disgusted. She crossed the stage, and bounded up the three flights of stairs leading to the dressing rooms to give the reply to Simonne.

In the wings the Prince was standing apart talking to Nana. He had not left her side. He was eyeing her through half-closed lids. Nana, smiling, was nodding with her eyes averted. But suddenly Comte Muffat obeyed an overwhelming impulse. He abandoned Bordenave who was giving him details about the manoeuvring of the winches and the rollers and went over to break up their conversation. Nana raised her eyes, smiled at him as she had smiled at His Highness. But she was still listening for her cue.

'Act Three is the shortest, I believe,' the Prince was saying, embarrassed by the presence of the count.

She made no reply, her face changed, suddenly she was concentrating on the task in hand. With a quick shrug she had slipped off her wrap, which

Madame Jules, standing behind her, caught in her hands. And naked, having put her two hands to her hair, as if to bring it under control, she went onstage.

‘Ssh! Ssh!’ whispered Bordenave.

The count and the Prince were taken unawares. Into the deep silence came a profound intake of breath, a distant murmur from the audience. Each evening the entrance of Venus, the naked goddess, produced the same effect. Muffat tried to see her. He put his eye to a hole. Beyond the arc of the dazzling circle of the footlights the auditorium looked dark, as though filled with reddish smoke. And against that neutral background of rows of pale faces, Nana stood out in white, bigger, blocking the view of the boxes from the balcony to the flies.* He saw her from the back with her hips taut, her arms outspread, while on the floor at foot height the head of the prompt, an old man who had a poor but honest face, was poking up as though cut off from his body. At certain phrases of her first speech, waves seemed to undulate from her neck down to her waist and expire at the edge of her tunic. When she had uttered the last note to a storm of applause, she bowed, her gauzy covering floating out, her hair hanging down below the waist in the foreshortening of her back. And seeing her from that angle, bent and with her wide hips broadening as she advanced towards the peephole through which he was looking at her, the count straightened up, white as a sheet. The scene had vanished. He could see nothing now except the back of the set, covered with old posters stuck all over the place. On the sloping platform among the lines of gaslights, the whole of Olympus had rejoined Madame Drouard who was dozing. They were waiting for the end of the act, Bosc and Fontan sitting on the floor with their chins on their knees, Prullière, stretching and yawning before his entrance, all of them exhausted, red-eyed, longing to get to bed.

At that moment Fauchery, who had been prowling round the room overlooking the garden since Bordenave had forbidden him the courtyard side, latched on to the count to save face, and offered to conduct him to the dressing rooms. Muffat, who was feeling increasingly feeble and unable to decide anything, ended up following the journalist, after searching for the Marquis de Chouard who was no longer there. He felt at one and the same time relieved and yet uneasy as he left the wings from where he had heard Nana sing.

Fauchery was already preceding him down the stairs which were closed off by wooden swing doors on the first and second floors. It was a staircase like the ones you find in houses of ill repute, such as Comte Muffat had seen in his stints as a member of the charity board—in a bad state of repair, crumbling, with yellow distemper, steps worn away by the constant tread of feet, and an iron rail polished by the rubbing of many hands. On every landing there was a low, square window at floor level. In the lamps fixed to the walls gas jets were burning, crudely illuminating the squalor and giving out a warmth that rose and gathered below the narrow spiral staircase.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, the count once more felt a warm breath on the back of his neck, that female smell wafting down from the dressing rooms in a flood of light and noise. And now with every step up the stairs, the musk of the powder, the sharpness of the toilet vinegars, warmed him, and made his head swim even more. Upstairs he came to two dark passages that forked abruptly, lined with doors like those in a sleazy hotel, painted yellow, with big white numbers on. Underfoot, tiles that had come loose were creating bumps as the old house subsided. The count ventured forth, glanced through a half-open door and saw a very dirty room, a workshop that resembled a local barber's, furnished with two chairs, a mirror, and a small shelf with drawers blackened by the grease of combs. A sweaty man, his shoulders glistening, was changing his underclothes, while in another, similar room a woman, about to leave, was putting on her gloves, her hair damp and straggly, as though she had just been taking a bath. But Fauchery called to the count who was just reaching the second floor when a furious 'Oh, my God' was heard from the corridor on the right. Mathilde, a little scrap of a girl, had just broken her basin and the soapy water was running out on to the landing. A dressing-room door shut with a bang. Two corseted women came skipping across, another with the top of her chemise between her teeth appeared and disappeared. Then there was laughter, a dispute, a song begun and as suddenly halted. Along the corridor through the openings you could see naked flesh, flashes of white skin, pale underclothes. Two very jolly girls were showing each other their birthmarks. One, very young, scarcely more than a child, had hitched her skirts up above the knee to put another stitch in her knickers while the dressers, seeing the two men, drew the curtains across lightly for the sake of decency. It was the scramble after the finale, the great cleaning-up of white and rouged faces, the putting-back-on of everyday clothes in the midst of a

cloud of rice powder, an increase of animal muskiness breathed through the half-closed doors. On the third floor Muffat was abandoning himself to the intoxication which threatened to overwhelm him. The chorus girls' dressing room was there: twenty women squashed together, soaps and bottles of lavender water in great disarray, it looked like the living room of a brothel. As he passed he heard the sound of vigorous washing, like a storm in a washbowl. And he was just going up to the top floor when his curiosity got the better of him and he glanced through a Judas hole* that had been left open. The room was empty, under the flaming gas lamp there was nothing except a forgotten chamber pot left in the middle of skirts lying in a jumble on the floor. That room was the last vision to remain in his head as he left. At the top, on the fourth floor, he couldn't breathe properly. All the odours, all the gas from the lamps were concentrated here. The yellow ceiling looked burnt, a lantern beamed out through a red fog. For a moment he had to catch hold of the iron balustrade that was warm to his touch, it seemed warm with life, he closed his eyes and with one breath filled his lungs with the whole sexuality of woman, as yet unknown, but which was now coming at him full in the face.

'Come along,' cried Fauchery, who had been gone a while. 'They are wondering where you are.'

At the end of the corridor was Clarisse and Simonne's dressing room, a long room under the roof, in a bad state of repair, with cant walls and sloping ceiling. The light was coming in from above through two deep openings. But at this time of night, gas flames lit the dressing room, which was covered in cheap, tawdry wallpaper, pink roses on a background of green trellis. Two wooden planks side by side, serving as tables for make-up, were covered with an oilcloth, blackened by spilt water, and under it lay dented zinc jugs, buckets full of slops, and crude yellow earthenware pots. Cheap bent items were strewn around; broken bowls, tortoiseshell combs that had lost their teeth, dirty with much use, everything that the hastiness and intimacy of two women together changing their clothes and getting their make-up off leave around them in a mess in a place where they are spending only a short time and where the dirt doesn't bother them.

'Come on then,' Fauchery said again, with the camaraderie of men in girls' quarters, 'Clarisse wants to give you a kiss.'

Muffat finally went in. But he was taken aback when he saw the Marquis de Chouard ensconced on a chair between the two tables. The

marquis had escaped to this room. He was sitting with his legs apart because a bucket was leaking and making a whitish pool on the floor. One felt that he was at home, knew all the best places to be, was rejuvenated in this stuffy washroom, in this calm, unembarrassed female atmosphere which was amplified and rendered more natural by the squalor in this little hole.

‘Are you seeing the old man?’ Simonne asked Clarisse in a whisper.

‘Not often nowadays!’ the other girl replied aloud.

The dresser, a very unattractive, homely girl, in the process of helping Simonne into her cloak, shook with laughter. All three were nudging one another, saying things that made them giggle more loudly still.

‘Come now, Clarisse, give the gentleman a kiss,’ Fauchery said again. ‘You know he’s rolling in money.’

And turning to the count:

‘You’ll see, she’s a lovely girl, she’ll give you a kiss.’

But Clarisse had had enough of men. She complained vociferously about those wretches who were waiting down below in the concierge’s lodge. And anyway she was in a hurry to go down again as they were going to make her miss her last scene. Then, as Fauchery was blocking the doorway, she placed two kisses on Muffat’s whiskers, saying:

‘It’s not that I’m cross with you, anyway. It’s Fauchery who’s annoying me.’

She slipped away. The count was embarrassed by the presence of his father-in-law. The blood rushed to his face. In Nana’s dressing room, surrounded by all those luxurious hangings and mirrors, he had not felt the acute excitement he was feeling now in the shocking poverty of this garret and the mess made by these two women. Meanwhile the marquis had just left after Simonne, who was in a hurry, and he was whispering something in her ear while she shook her head. Fauchery was following them, laughing. Then the count realized he was alone with the dresser who was rinsing out the sinks. And he too left, following them downstairs, his legs almost giving way under him, and again half-clothed women banged their doors shut as he passed. But in the midst of this flurry of girls let loose across the four floors, all he could clearly see was a cat, the fat ginger cat who in this musky, fume-filled oven of a place was padding along the steps, rubbing her back against the bars on the banisters with her tail in the air.

‘Thank goodness!’ came a husky female voice. ‘I thought they were going to keep us there all night! What a nuisance they are with their encores!’

It was all over, the curtain had just come down. There was a real stampede and the stairwell filled with exclamations and the frantic haste of people to get changed and go home. As Comte Muffat reached the last step, he saw Nana and the Prince walking slowly along the corridor. The young woman stopped. Then, lowering her voice:

‘Yes, very well, I shan’t be long.’

The Prince returned to the stage where Bordenave was waiting. Then left alone with Nana, yielding to an urge which contained both anger and desire, Muffat caught her up; and at the instant she was going into her dressing room, he kissed her hard on the back of her neck, on the little golden hairs which curled right down between her shoulder blades. It was as if he was returning the kiss he had received upstairs. Nana, furious, was already raising her hand, but when she recognized the count she smiled.

‘Oh, you gave me a fright!’ she said simply.

And her smile was adorable, embarrassed and submissive, as if she had been desperate for that kiss and was happy to have received it. But she *couldn’t*, neither that evening nor the next day. He had to wait. Even had she been available, she would have made him wait. That was what her look said. At last she went on:

‘I’m a houseowner, you know. Yes, I’m buying a house in the country near Orléans in the part of the country you go to sometimes. Bébé told me... You know little Georges Hugon? So come and visit me over there.’

The count, alarmed by what he—a shy man—had done, and ashamed of it, bowed ceremoniously, promising to honour this invitation. Then he left, walking as if in a dream.

He was going to rejoin the Prince when he heard Satin shouting as he passed by the foyer:

‘You are a dirty old man! Leave me alone!’

It was the Marquis de Chouard, who had decided to make do with Satin. She for her part had definitely had enough of this smart society. Nana had just introduced her to Bordenave, it was true. But it bored her to tears having to stay there with her mouth shut in case she said something stupid. And she wanted to assert her right to do as she wished, all the more so

because she had come across an old flame in the wings, the male extra who had been allocated the role of Pluto, a pastry-cook, and who had already given her a whole week of love and slaps. She was waiting for him, irritated by the marquis talking to her as if she was one of those ladies of the theatre. So she ended up getting on her high horse and shouting:

‘My husband’s coming, you’ll see!’

Meanwhile the actors in their outdoor coats, looking exhausted, were leaving one by one. Men and women were going down the small spiral staircase in dribs and drabs with their crumpled hats and shabby shawls silhouetted in the dim light, their faces pale and ugly without their rouge. On the stage where they were putting out the lights on the uprights and overhead, the Prince was listening to one of Bordenave’s anecdotes. He wanted to wait for Nana. When she finally appeared, the stage was in darkness, the fireman on duty was finishing his rounds, swinging his lantern. In order to save His Highness going out of his way through the Passage des Panoramas Bordenave had just opened up the corridor which led from the concierge’s lodge to the theatre foyer. And all along this exit was a bevy of girls happy at having given the slip to the men who were standing in the passage. They pushed each other, elbowing their way, glancing behind them, only pausing to draw breath again once they were outside; while Fontan, Bosc, and Prullière slowly withdrew, cracking jokes about the sombre-looking men pacing up and down the Galerie des Variétés, just when the girls were disappearing along the boulevard with their lovers. But Clarisse was the most cunning of all. She didn’t trust La Faloise. In fact he was still there in the lodge in the company of the gentlemen who were stubbornly continuing to sit on Madame Bron’s chairs. They were all peering around. But she walked straight past them, behind a friend. The gentlemen blinked, dismayed by the whirling and tumbling of skirts on the stairs, in despair at having waited for such a long time only to see them all flit away without being able to identify a single one. The litter of black kittens were asleep on the oilcloth against their mother’s belly, beatific and with their paws outstretched; while the fat ginger cat with the yellow eyes, sitting at the other end of the table with its tail stuck out, watched the women make their escape.

‘If Your Highness would be so good as to come this way,’ said Bordenave at the bottom of the stairs, pointing to the passage.

A few female extras were still pushing towards the exit. The Prince followed Nana. Muffat and the marquis brought up the rear. It was a long tunnel between the theatre and the neighbouring house, a kind of covered alleyway over which a sloping roof with skylights had been built. Damp oozed from the walls. Their footsteps echoed on the paved floor as though it were a vault. It was cluttered with such objects as you might find in an attic: a workbench on which the porter could patch up the sets, a pile of wooden barriers that they put out every night at the theatre door to organize the queue. Nana had to hitch up her dress as she passed a drinking fountain whose tap was not properly turned off and was flooding the paving stones. In the hall people said goodbye. And when Bordenave was alone, he summed up his view of the Prince with a disdainful shrug.

‘He’s a bit of a rum character all the same,’ he said, without further explanation to Fauchery, who was being led away by Rose Mignon with her husband for a reconciliation scene at home.

Muffat found himself alone on the pavement. His Highness had just coolly helped Nana into his cab. The marquis had followed Satin and her actor friend, excited and content to trail after those two reprobates in the vague hope of some favour. Then Muffat, in a fever of excitement, decided to go home on foot. He had given up the unequal struggle. The ideas and beliefs that he had held for forty years were being swept away in a flood of renewed life. As he walked down the boulevards, the rumbling of the last cabs was deafening him with the name ‘Nana’. The gas lamps were making her nakedness, her silky-smooth arms, her white shoulders dance before his eyes. And he felt her taking possession of him, he would have denied everything, sold everything, just to have her for one hour that evening. It was his youth awakening in him at last, a lustful adolescent puberty blazing up suddenly in the frigidity of his Catholicism and the dignity of the grown man.

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CHAPTER 6

COMTE MUFFAT, accompanied by his wife and daughter, had arrived the night before at Les Fondettes, where Madame Hugon, who was there alone with her son Georges, had invited them to stay the week. The house, built towards the end of the seventeenth century, stood in the middle of a vast close, quite unadorned, but the garden had wonderful shaded areas, a succession of ponds with running water supplied by springs. It was like a flood of greenery on the road from Orléans to Paris, clusters of trees which relieved the monotony of the flat countryside with its farmland stretching for endless kilometres into the distance.

At eleven, when the second bell had summoned everyone to lunch, Madame Hugon, with her kindly motherly smile, planted two big kisses on Sabine's cheeks, saying:

'It's my custom in the country, as you know. Seeing you here takes twenty years off my life. Did you sleep well in your old room?'

Then, not waiting for a reply and turning to Estelle:

'And this young lady has had a little sleep too, has she? Give me a kiss, my dear.'

They had sat down in the vast dining room whose windows looked out on to the park. But they only occupied one end of the table and sat close to one another, the better to enjoy each other's company. Sabine, in a very good mood, was relating memories of childhood which she had just been reminded of by Madame Hugon: months spent at Les Fondettes, long walks, falling into the pond one summer evening, a tale of chivalry discovered on top of a cupboard and read in winter by a fire of dried vine branches. And Georges, who had not seen the countess for some months, thought she looked rather strange, as though her face had changed, while that beanpole of an Estelle seemed more of a nonentity than ever, so dumb and awkward.

As they were eating hard-boiled eggs and chops, a simple meal, Madame Hugon complained of housekeeping problems: the butchers were getting to be impossible. She shopped for everything in Orléans, people didn't ever give her the cuts she wanted. But there again, if her guests didn't

have food of the best quality, it was their fault, they came to stay too late in the season.

‘It’s naughty of you,’ she said. ‘I’ve been expecting you ever since June and now it’s halfway through September. So that’s not good...’

She indicated, with a wave, the trees on the lawn turning yellow. There were clouds in the sky, a bluish mist drew a veil over the distance in a sweet, melancholic tranquillity.

‘Oh, I’m expecting more guests,’ she continued, ‘it will be such fun. First, two gentlemen that Georges invited, Monsieur Fauchery and Monsieur Daguenet. You know them, don’t you? Then Monsieur de Vandeuvres who has been saying for the last five years that he will come. This year perhaps he will!’

‘Oh good!’ laughed the countess. ‘It would be nice to get Monsieur de Vandeuvres...! But he is so busy.’

‘What about Philippe?’ enquired Muffat.

‘Philippe has asked for some time off,’ replied the elderly lady. ‘But by the time he arrives you will probably have left.’

Coffee was served. The conversation had got round to Paris and the name Steiner had been mentioned. That name drew forth a little cry from Madame Hugon.

‘Oh yes, Monsieur Steiner,’ she exclaimed. ‘Isn’t that the rather portly gentleman I met one evening at your house, the banker? What a disagreeable-looking man! Hasn’t he bought a country house for an actress quite near here, over the other side of La Choue, in the direction of Gumières! Everyone is very shocked! Did you know about that, my dear?’

‘No, I certainly didn’t,’ Muffat replied. ‘Oh! So Steiner has bought a house round these parts!’

Hearing his mother broach this subject, Georges had buried his nose in his cup. But he looked up and stared at the count, astonished at this reply. Why such a blatant lie? For his part the count, having noticed the young man’s reaction, threw him a defiant glance. Madame Hugon went into more details. The house was called La Mignotte. You had to go back up La Choue as far as Gumières and cross the bridge, and that took you another good two kilometres. Or you got your feet wet and risked falling in.

‘And what’s the name of the actress?’ asked the countess.

‘Um, they did say who it was,’ mused the old lady. ‘Georges, you were there this morning when the gardener was telling us...’

Georges pretended to be scanning his memory. Muffat waited, twiddling a little spoon round in his fingers. Then, the countess asked her husband:

‘Isn’t Monsieur Steiner with that singer from the Variétés, that Nana?’

‘Oh yes, that’s right—Nana. Dreadful woman!’ cried Madame Hugon, getting heated. ‘And they are expecting her at La Mignotte. I have all the news from the gardener. Isn’t that right, Georges? The gardener said she was supposed to arrive this evening.’

The count twitched slightly in surprise. But Georges replied swiftly:

‘Oh no, Maman, the gardener was talking through his hat... Just now the coachman was saying the opposite: they are not expecting anyone at La Mignotte until the day after tomorrow.’

He was trying to sound casual, studying the count’s reaction to his words out of the corner of his eye. The latter was twiddling his coffee spoon again, as though relieved. The countess, staring out into the park, into the blue distance, did not seem to be following the conversation any more, and there was the suspicion of a smile on her lips at a secret thought, which had suddenly crossed her mind. Sitting upright on her chair, Estelle took in what they were saying about Nana but the expression on her pale, virginal face did not alter one whit.

After a silence, Madame Hugon recovered her good humour and muttered: ‘Well, good gracious, I shouldn’t get worked up about it. It takes all sorts... If we meet this lady on the road, we shall have to ignore her, that’s all.’

And as they were leaving the table, she scolded Comtesse Sabine again for not coming to see her that year. But the countess protested, and blamed her husband for putting off the visit; twice, the evening before their departure, with their bags already packed, he had countermanded the order, saying he had urgent business to attend to. He had made up his mind suddenly now at the last moment when the trip had apparently been abandoned. Then the old lady said that Georges had twice announced his arrival, without turning up, and that he had arrived at Les Fondettes two nights ago when they had given up expecting him. They had all just moved down into the garden. The two men on the right and left of these ladies were saying nothing and keeping out of it.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Madame Hugon, planting kisses on her son’s fair locks. ‘Zizi is such a good boy to come and shut himself up with his mother in the country... Such a good son, he doesn’t forget me!’

In the afternoon she was worried. Georges who, on leaving the table, had complained of a headache, was apparently now being gradually overcome by a terrible migraine. Towards four o’clock, he wanted to go to bed, that was the only thing that would help. When he’d had a good sleep, he would be perfectly all right again. His mother insisted on seeing him up to bed herself. But as she was leaving the room, he jumped up and told her he was locking himself in so that he wouldn’t be disturbed. And he shouted ‘Goodnight, Mother dear, till tomorrow!’ in an affectionate voice, promising to have a good sleep. He did not go back to bed, but bright-eyed and looking in the best of health, he got dressed again noiselessly and sat quietly waiting in his chair. When the dinner bell rang, he listened out for Comte Muffat going down to the drawing room. Then, minutes later, certain of not being seen, he climbed nimbly out of the window and shinned down a drainpipe. His bedroom on the first floor looked out on to the back of the house. He landed in a flower bed, got to the end of the park, and ran as fast as he could across the fields in the direction of La Choue on an empty stomach, his heart thumping with excitement. Night was falling and it had started to drizzle.

It was indeed the evening Nana was supposed to arrive at La Mignotte. Ever since Steiner had bought this country house for her in May, from time to time she had been consumed with the desire to go and stay there, and so much wanted to, she had wept with frustration; but on each occasion Bordenave had refused to allow her any time away and put her off until September on the pretext of not wanting to replace her by an understudy while the Exhibition was still on, even for one night. Towards the end of August he was talking about October. Nana, furious, declared she was going to La Mignotte on 15 September. And in defiance of Bordenave, in his presence she invited a whole lot of people to visit. One afternoon at her house when Muffat, whom she was cleverly resisting, implored her, she finally promised, shaking and shivering as he was, that she would be kind, but out there in the country; and then she told him the fifteenth as well. But on the twelfth she felt the urge to go there straight away on her own with Zoë. Perhaps Bordenave would find a way of stopping her if he knew the date. She was delighted to be leaving him in the lurch, sending him a note

from the doctor. Once it had entered her head to arrive first at La Mignotte and live there for two days without anybody knowing, she fussed Zoë about the trunks, pushed her into a cab and, in a rush of spontaneous affection, asked her to forgive her and gave her a kiss. It was only when she got to the buffet on the station that she thought of writing Steiner a letter to tell him. She asked him to wait till the day after next to join her there if he wanted her to be rested. And, rushing on to another plan, she wrote a second letter in which she begged her aunt to bring little Louis straight away. It would do him such a lot of good! And what a lovely time they would have amongst the trees! From Paris to Orléans in the railway carriage, that was all she talked about, moist-eyed; it was a sudden attack of maternal affection, the flowers, the birds and her child all mingling in a sudden crisis of motherly love.

La Mignotte was over five miles away. Nana wasted an hour trying to hire a cab, a huge carriage in a bad state of repair which made a clanking noise as it trundled along. She at once seized on the coachman, a little old man with not much to say, whom she pestered with questions. Had he often been to La Mignotte? So was it just beyond that hill? There must be a lot of trees there? And could you see the house from a long way off? The little old man answered with grunts. In the coach Nana sat impatiently on the edge of her seat, while Zoë, cross at having to leave Paris in such a hurry, was withdrawn and in a bad mood. The horse stopped abruptly, the young woman thought they had arrived. She poked her head out of the window and asked:

‘So are we there then?’

For all reply, the coachman whipped the horse, who was making its way laboriously up a hill. With delight, Nana contemplated the great plain under the grey sky where large clouds were gathering.

‘Oh, look Zoë, look at all that grass! Is it all corn? My word, how pretty it is!’

‘It’s obvious Madame is not from the country,’ the maidservant said, tight-lipped. ‘I was only too familiar with the countryside when I was with my dentist who had a house at Bougival.* Anyway it’s cold this evening, it’s damp around these parts.’

They were passing beneath some trees. Nana was sniffing at the scent of the leaves like a puppy. Suddenly at a bend in the road she caught sight of a house through the branches. Perhaps that was it? And she began a

conversation with the coachman who still answered no, shaking his head. Then, as they went down the hill on the other side, he simply pointed his whip and muttered:

‘Over there.’

She jumped up and leaned right out of the window.

‘Where, where?’ she cried, pale and unable to see it yet.

Finally she made out a section of wall. Then she uttered little cries, jigged around in her seat, altogether letting herself go in an overwhelming rush of womanly excitement.

‘Zoë, I can see it, I can see it! Look on the other side! Oh, on the roof there is a veranda, with bricks. There’s a greenhouse over there! It’s enormous! Oh, how happy I am! Look Zoë, just look!’

The carriage had stopped in front of the iron gate. A small door in it opened and the gardener, a lanky stick of a man, appeared, cap in hand. Nana tried to recover her dignity, for the coachman, his lips still sealed, already seemed to be laughing at her on the quiet. She managed to stop herself running in, and listened to the gardener who was very chatty and begged Madame to forgive the untidiness, seeing that he had only received Madame’s letter that morning. But in spite of efforts to restrain herself, she was in seventh heaven, and walked at such a speed that Zoë couldn’t keep up with her. At the end of the path, she stopped for a second to take in the house with one glance. It was a large Italianate building with another smaller one adjoining it, which a rich Englishman, who had spent two years in Naples, had built and immediately disliked.

‘I will show Madame round,’ said the gardener.

But she had got there ahead of him and shouted not to bother, she would prefer to visit on her own. And without taking off her hat, she launched herself into the rooms, calling to Zoë, aiming comments at her from one passage to another, filling the void of this house which had been empty for so many months with her little cries and laughter. First, the hall: it was a little damp but that wasn’t a problem because they weren’t going to sleep there. The salon was very chic with those windows opening out on to the lawn. Only the red furnishings were hideous, she would change that. As for the dining room, look! What a lovely dining room and what feasts you could give in Paris if you had a dining room as big as that! As she was going up to the first floor, she remembered she hadn’t seen the kitchen; she

went down again exclaiming, Zoë would be amazed at the lovely sink and the size of the hearth, you could roast a sheep in it. When she had gone back upstairs, she was especially enthusiastic about her bedroom, which a decorator from Orléans had hung with Louis XVI pale pink cretonne. Oh, you would definitely sleep as soundly as any little schoolgirl in a cosy bed like that!

After that came four or five guest bedrooms, then some magnificent attic rooms. Very useful for the trunks. Zoë, reluctantly, looking unimpressed at every room, was lingering behind Madame. She watched her disappear up the top of a steep ladder to the attic. No, thank you very much, she didn't want to break a leg. But a voice floated down to her, distant, as if blowing through a chimney.

'Zoë, Zoë, where are you? Come up here! Oh, you can't imagine! It's like a fairy tale!'

Zoë climbed the ladder, grumbling. She found Madame on the roof, leaning on the brick balustrade, looking at the valley that stretched out in the distance. The horizon was immense, but it was vanishing in a grey mist and a gusty wind was chasing away the drops of rain. Nana had to hang on to her hat with her two hands so that it would not be blown off, while her skirts were flapping like a flag in the wind.

'Oh no, fancy going up there!' Zoë said, retreating at once. 'Madame will get blown away... What atrocious weather!'

Madame did not hear. Leaning over, she was surveying the grounds below. There were seven or eight acres, surrounded by walls. She was utterly entranced at the sight of the vegetable garden. She rushed back to the staircase and shoved the maid down in front of her, crying incoherently:

'It's full of cabbages! Huge cabbages this size! And lettuces, sorrel, onions, everything! Come quick!'

The rain was coming on harder. She opened her white silk parasol, ran down the paths.

'Madame will take ill!' Zoë shouted after her, remaining calmly under the awning over the front steps.

But Madame wanted to see everything. At each new discovery there were more exclamations.

'Zoë, spinach! Come over here! Oh, artichokes! Aren't they funny! So do they have flowers, artichokes? Goodness, what's that? I don't know what

that is. Come here Zoë, perhaps you know?'

The maidservant did not move. Whatever had got into Madame's head? Now the rain was sheeting down, the little white silk parasol was completely black, and did not protect Madame at all, her skirt was dripping wet. It did not bother her in the slightest. She visited the vegetable garden and the orchard, stopping at every tree, stooping to examine each bed. Then she ran over to peer down the well, lifted a frame to see what was underneath, got absorbed in the contemplation of an enormous pumpkin. She had an urgent need to go down every path, to take immediate possession of these things she had dreamed of in the old days when she was trailing round the streets of Paris in her working-class clogs. The rain increased, but she did not feel it, was just very sorry that the daylight was fading. She could not see it all clearly, she touched it with her fingers to find out what it was like. Suddenly, in the half-light, she saw some strawberries. Then she became a child once more.

'Strawberries! Strawberries! There are some here, I can smell them! Zoë, bring a dish, come and pick strawberries!'

And Nana, who had crouched down in the mud, let her parasol drop and received the full deluge. With wet hands, she plucked the strawberries from amongst the leaves. Zoë had not brought her a dish. As the young woman straightened up, she suddenly felt alarmed. She thought she had seen a shape gliding along the path.

'A wild animal!' she cried.

But then astonishment halted her there in the middle of the path. It was a man and she could see who it was.

'What! Bébé! Whatever are you doing here, Bébé?'

'Yes, it's me, here I am!' Georges replied.

She was bewildered.

'So did you know from the gardener what time I would arrive? Oh look, the boy is soaking wet!'

'I'll explain. The rain caught me as I was on the way. Then I didn't want to go back to Gumières and as I crossed La Choue I suddenly fell into a deep bit, dammit.'

At once Nana forgot about the strawberries. She was overwhelmed with sympathy for him. Poor Zizi in the water! She piloted him towards the house and talked of making a huge fire.

‘You know,’ he murmured, stopping her in the shadows, ‘I was hiding because I was afraid of being scolded like in Paris when I came to see you without warning you first.’

She began to laugh, and planted a kiss on his forehead instead. Until today she had treated him like a little boy, not taking his protestations seriously, amusing herself with him as if he were a young man of no consequence. Now she made a huge fuss of him. She insisted on having a fire lit in the bedroom, they’d be more comfortable there. Zoë had not been very surprised by the sight of Georges, since she was used to all sorts of people turning up unannounced. But the gardener who was bringing up the wood was flabbergasted at the sight of this gentleman dripping with water, to whom, he was certain, he had not opened the door. They sent him away, having no more need of him. A lamp shone in the room and the fire threw out a big bright flame.

‘He’ll never get dry, he’ll catch cold,’ Nana said, seeing Georges shiver.

And she didn’t have a pair of men’s trousers! She was just about to call the gardener back when she had an idea. Zoë was unpacking in the dressing room, bringing Madame underclothes to change into, a blouse, petticoats, a dressing gown.

‘But that’s perfect!’ cried the young woman. ‘Zizi can put all of that on, can’t you? You don’t object to that? And then when your clothes are dry, you can leave quickly so your mother won’t tell you off. Hurry up, I’m going to change as well, in the dressing room.’

When she reappeared ten minutes later in a dressing gown she clasped her hands in delight.

‘Oh, how sweet! What a darling girl he is!’ He had merely put on a large nightdress with a lace panel, embroidered trousers, and batiste dressing gown trimmed with lace. Dressed like that, the fair young man with his bare arms and sandy locks, still damp, curling down his neck, looked like a girl.

‘He’s as slim as me!’ Nana said, catching hold of him by the waist. ‘Zoë, come and see how it suits him... What do you think? Down to the ground! Apart from the bodice which is too big... Poor Zizi, he is not as big as me on top.’

‘Oh, of course, I could do with a bit there,’ Georges murmured, with a smile.

All three were having a fine time. Nana had started buttoning the dressing gown top to bottom, so that he was decent. She turned him round like a doll, patted him, plumped up the skirts at the back. And she kept asking him questions, was he all right, was he too hot? Yes, wasn't he just! Nothing kept you warm like a woman's bodice. If he could, he would wear one all the time. He wriggled around in it, relishing the softness and looseness of this garment that smelt nice and in which he imagined he could feel something of the warmth of Nana.

Meanwhile, Zoë had taken the sodden clothes down to the kitchen to dry them off as quickly as possible in front of a fire of dried vine branches. Then Georges, stretching out in an armchair, admitted he hadn't eaten.

'Tell me, are you not eating tonight? I'm starving. I haven't had any dinner.'

Nana was cross. What a very silly boy to run away from his maman's house on an empty stomach and get wet through in the river! But she was famished too. Of course they must eat! Only they would make do with whatever they had. And they improvised with a little table dragged in front of the fire, the funniest of suppers. Zoë hurried to find the gardener who had made some cabbage soup in case Madame had not dined in Orléans before she left. Madame had forgotten to mention in her letter what he should prepare. Luckily there was plenty in the cellar. So they had cabbage soup with a little bit of bacon. Then, rummaging in her bag, Nana found all manner of provisions she had stuffed in just in case: a small pâté de foie gras, a bag of sweets, oranges. Both ate, hungry as wolves with their youthful appetites, like friends who don't have to stand on ceremony. Nana called Georges 'My dear girl'; it seemed more loving, more intimate. At dessert, so as not to disturb Zoë, they used the same spoon each in turn, in a pot of preserves they found on top of a cupboard.

'Oh, my dear girl,' said Nana, pushing away the table, 'I haven't dined so well for ten years!'

However, it was getting late, she tried to send the boy home, fearing that he would get into trouble. He kept saying he had plenty of time. Besides the clothes were not drying very quickly. Zoë declared they would take another hour at least. And as she was asleep on her feet, tired from the journey, they sent her to bed. Then they were alone in the silent house.

It was a beautiful evening. The fire was dying, the embers glowing. It was rather stuffy in the big blue bedroom where Zoë had made up the bed

before she retired. Nana, needing more air, stood up a moment to open the window. But then she uttered a little cry.

‘Goodness, how beautiful! Look, my darling girl.’

Georges had come over and put his arm round Nana’s waist, as if the window ledge looked rather low to him, and leaned his head on her shoulder. The weather had abruptly changed, a clear sky was unfolding above and a full moon was spreading a cloth of gold over the countryside. Supreme peace reigned, the valley widened and opened out to the immense plain where the trees made dark islands in the unruffled brightness of the lake. And Nana, feeling very small, became rather emotional. She was certain she had dreamed about nights like these at a time of her life she could not remember. Everything that had happened since getting off the coach—this vast countryside, these grasses which had such a heady scent, this house, these vegetables—all of this caused such a turmoil in her that she felt she had left Paris twenty years ago. Her life of yesterday had become a distant memory. She was experiencing new sensations. Georges meanwhile was placing little enticing kisses on her neck, which flustered her even more. She pushed him away with a hesitant hand, like a child who is tired by such amorous overtures, and repeated to him that he must go. Georges was not saying he wouldn’t; in a while, he would leave in a little while.

But a bird started singing, and then stopped. It was a robin in an elder tree under the window.

‘Wait,’ Georges said. ‘The lamplight is scaring him, I’ll put it out.’

And when he came back to put his arm round her again, he said:

‘We’ll light it again soon.’

Then, listening to the robin while the young boy nestled against her, Nana remembered. Yes, it was in romances that she had seen all that. In the olden days she would have given the world to have the full moon, the robins, and a lovelorn young man beside her. Oh she could have wept, it seemed so good and innocent! Had she not been born to live a life of virtue? She pushed Georges away, he was getting more insistent.

‘No, leave me alone, I don’t want to... It would be bad at your age... Listen to me, I shall just be your maman.’

She was overwhelmed by feelings of modesty and shame. She was flushed, although no one could see her. Behind them the bedroom was

getting darker, outside stillness and quiet was spreading over the deserted countryside. She had never felt so ashamed but, in spite of her reluctance and her protestations, she was gradually weakening. This disguise, this woman's bodice and dressing gown, still made her laugh. It was as though a girlfriend were teasing her.

'Oh, it's not right, it's not right,' she faltered, after one last effort.

And she fell like a virgin into the arms of this child, under the beautiful night sky. The house slept.

The next day at Les Fondettes when the bell rang for dinner, the table in the dining room was no longer too big. Fauchery and Daguenet arrived together in the first cab, and after them, having got off the second train, the Comte de Vandeuvres. Georges was the last to come down, rather pale, dark rings under his eyes. He answered that he was feeling a lot better but was still shaky from the violence of the attack. Madame Hugon, who examined him with a worried smile, smoothed back his locks, uncombed that morning, while he shrank back as though embarrassed by this caress. At table she joked with Vandeuvres affectionately and told him she had been expecting him for the last five years.

'Anyway, so here you are! What have you been doing?'

Vandeuvres replied lightly that he had lost a fortune the day before at the Club. So he had left, with the idea of retiring to the country.

'Yes, by God, if you can find me a rich heiress in these parts... There must be some delightful women hereabouts.'

The elderly woman was also thanking Daguenet and Fauchery for accepting her son's invitation, when she was surprised and delighted to see the Marquis de Chouard come in, brought by a third cab.

'Oh, my goodness,' she cried. 'So it's a real reunion this morning? Did you arrange it amongst yourselves... What is going on? I haven't been able to get you together for years and now you have all come at once. Oh, I'm delighted, to be sure.'

Another place was set. Fauchery found himself sitting next to Comtesse Sabine who surprised him with her vivacity since he had seen her before with such a weary expression in the austere salon in the Rue Miromesnil. Daguenet, sitting on the left of Estelle, seemed, on the contrary, irritated by this tall, dumb girl, whose sharp elbows he found very disagreeable. Muffat

and Chouard had exchanged a furtive glance. Meanwhile Vandeuvres was elaborating on the joke about his forthcoming marriage.

‘Talking about women,’ Madame Hugon eventually remarked to him, ‘I have a new neighbour whom I suppose you know.’

And she named Nana. Vandeuvres pretended to be extremely astonished.

‘What? Nana’s property is near here!’

Fauchery and Daguenet uttered an exclamation of surprise as well. The Marquis de Chouard was eating a piece of chicken breast and did not appear to be following the conversation. Not one of the men smiled.

‘Yes, indeed,’ went on the elderly lady, ‘and, as I was saying, this person arrived at La Mignotte last night. I learned that this morning from the gardener.’

Suddenly the men were unable to conceal their genuine surprise. They all looked up. What! Nana arrived! But they were only expecting her the following day, they thought they had got there before her! Only Georges’s lashes were lowered; he studied his glass with a weary air. Ever since the beginning of dinner, he had looked as though he was asleep with his eyes open, a vague smile on his lips.

‘Are you still in pain, Zizi?’ asked his mother, who had her eyes on him the whole time. He shivered, and replied with a blush that he was very well, despite looking overwhelmed and hungry for more, like a girl who has danced all night.

‘Whatever have you got there on your neck?’ Madame Hugon asked, alarmed. ‘It’s all red.’

He was confused and started to stammer. He didn’t know, there was nothing on his neck. Then, pulling his collar up:

‘Oh yes, an insect bite.’

The Marquis de Chouard had glanced at the little red mark out of the corner of his eye. Muffat looked at Georges as well. They were just finishing dinner and making plans to go out for the day. Fauchery was more and more taken with Comtesse Sabine’s gaiety. As he was passing her a plate of fruit, their hands met, and for a second she gave him such a darkly piercing look he was reminded again of the secret he had been told one drunken night. And she wasn’t the same woman, there was something more assured about her, her dress of soft grey silk falling softly over her shoulders lent a note of abandon to her fine, nervous elegance.

As they left the table, Daguenet stayed behind with Fauchery to make crude remarks about Estelle. She was ‘a right broomstick to shove into a man’s bed’. But he grew more thoughtful when the journalist told him the amount of her dowry: four hundred thousand francs.

‘And what about the mother then?’ Fauchery asked. ‘Very chic, don’t you think?’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say no to her! But no chance there, old chap!’

‘Hmm, who knows! We shall see.’

They weren’t going out that day, the rain was sheeting down. Georges had been quick to make himself scarce and locked himself firmly in his room. The men avoided talking about it amongst themselves, though at the same time they were not deceived as to the reasons for them all being there. Vandeuvres, very injured by losing at cards, really did think he would go to the country to get away from it all, and he was counting on the proximity of a female friend to prevent him from getting too bored. Fauchery, taking advantage of the time off accorded to him by Rose, who was very busy at present, was planning to talk about a second article with Nana in the hope of establishing warmer relations between them while they were in the country. Daguenet, who had been sulking ever since Steiner arrived, was thinking he and Nana might resume relations, and that he might obtain a few favours from her if the occasion arose. As for the Marquis de Chouard, he was biding his time. But amongst all these men following in the footsteps of Venus, before she had even had time to remove her greasepaint, none was more ardent than Muffat, none more tormented by the unfamiliar feelings of passion, fear, and anger doing battle in his anguished being. He had a solemn promise, Nana was expecting him. So why had she left two days earlier? He resolved to go to La Mignotte that very night after dinner.

In the evening, just as the count was leaving the park, Georges slipped out after him. He let him go ahead along the road to Gumières, crossed La Choue himself, and made it to Nana’s out of breath, enraged, with his eyes full of tears. Oh, he knew what was going on, the old man was on his way to a rendezvous with her. Nana, flabbergasted by this jealous scene and all upset by this turn of events, took him in her arms and consoled him the best she could. No, no, he was wrong, she wasn’t expecting anyone. If the gentleman was on his way, it wasn’t her fault. What a silly boy Zizi was, to make himself so unhappy for no reason at all! She swore on the head of her

child, it was only her Georges she loved. And she kissed him and wiped his tears away.

‘Listen, you’ll see I’m all yours,’ she went on, when he had calmed down a little. ‘Steiner has arrived, he’s upstairs. You know I can’t show *him* the door.’

‘Yes, I know that, I’m not talking about *him*,’ the boy whispered.

‘Well, I’ve stuck him in the back bedroom and told him I am poorly. He’s unpacking... Since nobody saw you, go upstairs quickly and hide in my bedroom and wait for me.’

Georges flung his arms around her neck. So it was true, she was fond of him! Like yesterday, they would put out the lamp and stay in the dark together until daylight. Then, at a ring of the doorbell, he ran upstairs on tiptoe. In the bedroom he at once took off his shoes so as not to make a noise. Then he hid on the floor behind a curtain, waiting there obediently.

A still-flustered Nana received Comte Muffat with a degree of embarrassment. She had promised him and would have tried to keep her word, because this man seemed to be in deadly earnest. But really, who would have credited the events of the previous day? The journey, this house which was new to her, that boy who arrived soaked to the skin, how good it all seemed and how lovely it would be to do that again! It was Muffat’s bad luck! For the last three months she had kept him waiting, playing the part of a respectable woman, to fan the flames of his desire. Well, he would still have to wait, and he could go away if he didn’t like it. She would have abandoned the whole affair rather than be unfaithful to Georges.

The count had sat down with the formal air of someone visiting from a neighbouring country house. Only his hands shook. Desire, in this confident but still virginal nature, had been whipped up by the astute tactics of Nana, resulting in terrible ravages in the long run. This solemn gentleman, this chamberlain who graced the salons of the Tuileries, bit his pillow at night and sobbed in frustration as the same sensual images floated into his head. But this time he was resolved to have done with it. Along the way, in the immense peace of the twilight, he had dreamed of brutalities. And straight away, after the first words had been exchanged, he tried to grab hold of Nana with both hands.

‘No no, be careful,’ she protested calmly, with a smile.

He gritted his teeth and lunged at her again. Then, as she fought against him, his language became coarse and he reminded her crudely that he had come in order to go to bed with her. She caught hold of his hands, still smiling, yet embarrassed. She called him ‘tu’,* to soften her refusal.

‘Really I can’t, darling, calm yourself. I can’t now, Steiner’s upstairs.’

But he was beside himself, mad; she had never seen a man in that state before. She panicked. She put her fingers over his mouth to stifle the cries he was uttering. And lowering her voice, she begged him to be quiet, to let her go. Steiner was coming downstairs. Oh, how stupid it all was! When Steiner came into the room he heard Nana say, lolling back in her armchair:

‘I just *love* the countryside.’

She looked round, breaking off.

‘Darling, it’s Comte Muffat. He saw lights on in the house as he was taking a walk and came to welcome us.’

The two men shook hands. Muffat was silent for a moment, his face in shadow, Steiner looked sullen.They talked about Paris. Business was not going too well. Dreadful things were happening in the Bourse. After a quarter of an hour Muffat took his leave. And as the young woman showed him out, he asked for a rendezvous the following night, but without success. Steiner almost immediately went up to bed, grumbling about women’s everlasting complaints. Finally the two old men were taken care of! When she came back to Georges, Nana found him waiting obediently behind his curtain. The bedroom was in darkness. He had pushed her back on to the floor as she sat next to him and they were rolling around together, stopping intermittently, stifling their giggles with kisses whenever their bare feet met a piece of furniture. Far off on the road to Gumières, Comte Muffat was walking slowly away, hat in hand, his burning head cooled by the freshness of the silent night.

So in the next few days life was full of delights. In the arms of this boy, Nana felt as if she were fifteen again. Used to men and disgusted by them, in the caresses of this child, the flower of love was blooming once more in her heart. She would suddenly blush, would experience an emotion which left her shaking, wanting to laugh or cry, like a troubled virgin visited by desires of which she was ashamed. She had never felt anything similar before. The countryside filled her with warm, loving feelings. In her childhood she had wished for a long time that she could live in a meadow

with a goat, because one day on the slope on the fortifications* she had seen a bleating goat attached to a stake. Now this property, all this land she owned, filled her heart to bursting, so much did her ambitions find themselves surpassed. She was living the novel sensations of a little girl once more. And when in the evening, light-headed from her day spent out in the fresh air, intoxicated with the scent of the leaves, she went upstairs to meet her Zizi hidden behind the curtain, it seemed like the escapade of a schoolgirl on holiday, a love affair with a little cousin she was going to marry, trembling at the slightest noise, afraid that her parents might hear, enjoying the delicious fumblings and the blissful fears of her first love.

At that time, Nana had fantasies like those of a sentimental girl. She would gaze at the moon for hours. One night, when the whole house was asleep, she wanted to go down to the garden with Georges. They wandered beneath the trees with their arms around each other's waists, and bedded down in the grass, where they got soaked by the morning dew. Another time in the bedroom, she was silent for a while before she began to sob in the young boy's arms, stammering that she was afraid of dying. She would often sing softly a little romantic song that moved her to tears, a favourite of Madame Lerat's, full of flowers and birds, which she broke off in order to clasp Georges in a passionate embrace and demand his solemn promise of everlasting love. In fact she was just being silly, as she herself admitted when both of them, now like old friends again, smoked cigarettes sitting on the bed with their bare legs, tapping the sides with their heels.

But what finally made the young woman's heart melt was the arrival of Louiset. The outburst of motherly love was as violent as an attack of madness. She carried her child out into the sun to see him tottering round. She dressed him up like a little prince, and rolled around with him on the grass. As soon as he arrived she would have him sleep in the room next to her, where Madame Lerat, very affected by being in the countryside, had been snoring from the moment her head touched the pillow. And Zizi did not suffer as a result—quite the opposite. She said she had two children, she treated them both alike in her impulsive fashion. During the night, she left Zizi a dozen times to see if Louiset was breathing properly. But when she came back to bed, she took Zizi in her arms again and lavished her remaining caresses upon him, as if she were his maman, while he, enjoying the sinful pleasure of being a baby in the arms of this big girl, allowed himself to be rocked to sleep like an infant in his cot. It was all so nice that,

enraptured by this way of life, she seriously suggested to him that they should live in the country for ever and ever. They would send everyone else away and live all on their own, he, she, and the child. And they made hundreds of plans until dawn, oblivious to the snores of Madame Lerat, who, worn out by picking her wildflowers, was sleeping like a log.

This happy state lasted more than a week. Comte Muffat came every evening and went away again, purple in the face and his blood boiling. One evening he did not even get through the door; Steiner had had to go to Paris, and Madame was indisposed. Nana was each day more and more opposed to the idea of being unfaithful to Georges. Such an innocent, trusting young boy! She would have considered herself the lowest of the low. And anyway she would have thought it disgusting. Zoë, watching what was going on, did not say anything but was scornful of the whole affair and thought Madame very silly.

On the sixth day an unexpected party of visitors arrived to disturb this idyll. Nana had invited a lot of people, thinking they wouldn't come. So one afternoon she was astounded and extremely discomfited when she saw a packed omnibus pull up outside the gates of La Mignotte.

'Here we are!' cried Mignon who was the first to get out, dragging his sons Henri and Charles after him.

Labordette appeared behind them, handing down a seemingly never-ending line of ladies: Lucy Stewart, Caroline Héquet, Tatan Néné, Maria Blond. Nana was hoping that was the lot, when La Faloise jumped down from the running-board and with trembling arms helped Gaga and her daughter Amélie down. That made eleven. It was a laborious business getting them settled in. At La Mignotte there were five guest rooms, one of which was already occupied by Madame Lerat and Louiset. They gave the biggest one to the La Faloise and Gaga ménage, deciding that Amélie could sleep on a truckle bed next door in the dressing room. Mignon and his two sons had the third bedroom; Labordette the fourth. That left one room that they made into a kind of dormitory with four beds for Lucy, Caroline, Tatan, and Maria. As for Steiner, he could sleep on the sofa in the drawing room. An hour later, when all her guests were accommodated, Nana, who had at first been furious, was delighted to play at being lady of the manor. The ladies complimented her on La Mignotte, out of this world, darling! They brought with them a whiff of Paris air, all the gossip from the last week, talking nineteen to the dozen, laughing, exclaiming, and slapping

each other on the back. And by the way, what about Bordenave? What had he said about her running off like that? Not much. After he had blustered about getting the gendarmes to bring her back, he had just gone ahead and got an understudy that evening; and moreover the understudy, little Violaine, was enjoying quite a success in *La Blonde Vénus*. That piece of news had a sobering effect on Nana.

It was only four o'clock. They suggested an outing.

'Do you know,' said Nana, 'I was about to dig up some potatoes when you arrived.'

Then they all wanted to lift potatoes, without even stopping to change their clothes. That would be a little outing for them. The gardener and two assistants were already outside in the plot behind the house. The ladies knelt on the earth, turning over the earth with their sticks, uttering little screams when they uncovered a large potato. So amusing! But Tatan Néné was in her element. She had lifted so many when she was young that she forgot where she was and gave the others advice, implying that they didn't know what they were doing. The gentlemen were more offhand about it. Mignon was earnestly making the most of his stay in the country to complete his sons' education. He told them about Parmentier.*

In the evening dinner was a riotous affair. They were ravenous. Nana, very excited, had a set-to with her maître d'hôtel, a man who been in service at the bishopric in Orléans. At coffee the ladies smoked. The most unholy din, like a wedding celebration, could be heard through the windows and died away into the peaceful distance of the night. The peasants, working late in the fields, turned their heads to gaze at the house ablaze with light.

'Oh, it's so annoying that you are leaving the day after tomorrow,' Nana said. 'But we still have time to arrange an excursion.'

And it was decided that the following day, a Sunday, they would go and visit the ruins of the ancient Abbaye de Chamont seven kilometres away. Five carriages would come and pick them all up after lunch and bring them back to La Mignotte for dinner at about seven. It would be delightful.

That evening Comte Muffat, as was his wont, walked up the hill and rang the doorbell. But the blazing lights in the windows, the raucous laughter astonished him. When he heard Mignon's voice he realized what was going on and went away, enraged by this new obstacle to his pleasure,

and at his wits' end, resolved to resort to brute force. Georges, who had used the small door since he had the key to it, went quietly up to Nana's bedroom, hugging the wall as he went. But he had to wait until gone midnight. She finally appeared, having had far too much to drink, but was even more maternal towards Georges than on other nights. When she drank, it made her so amorous that she became very clinging. So she insisted on him going to the Abbaye de Chamont. He protested, afraid of being seen with her. If people saw him in her company in a carriage, there would be hell to pay. But she broke down and wept loudly, in despair at being slighted like that, so he consoled her and gave his solemn promise that he would join the party.

'So do you still love me?' she spluttered. 'Tell me you still love me. My darling one, if I died, would you be very very sad?'

At Les Fondettes, the proximity of Nana upset the whole household. Every day at lunch, the worthy Madame Hugon couldn't help referring to *that woman*, recounting what her gardener had told her, feeling the kind of obsessive interest that loose women arouse in even the most worthy of matrons. She, such a liberal-minded woman, was revolted, exasperated, and had the vague presentiment that something bad was about to happen, which frightened her in the evenings as though she was aware of the existence of an animal escaped from some zoo in the surrounding countryside. So she picked a quarrel with her guests, accusing them all of stalking around La Mignotte. The Comte de Vandeuvres had been seen on the main road laughing with a lady with long hair; but he protested, denying that it was Nana, and in fact it was Lucy who was with him, telling him how she had just shown her third prince the door. The Marquis de Chouard also went out every day but he said it was on doctor's orders. As far as Daguenet and Fauchery were concerned, Madame Hugon was being unfair. The former in particular did not leave Les Fondettes; giving up his plan to re-establish relations with Nana, he was showing a respectful attentiveness to Estelle. Likewise with Fauchery and the Muffat ladies. Once only had he come across Mignon on a path, his arms full of flowers, botanizing with his sons. The two men had shaken hands, exchanging news of Rose; she was in the best of health; they had both received a letter that morning in which she begged them to take advantage of the fresh air for a while longer. So of all her guests, the elderly lady spared only Comte Muffat and Georges. The count, who claimed to have important business in Orléans, could not be

running after loose women at the same time; and as for Georges, the poor boy was becoming of great concern, for each evening he was plagued with terrible migraines which obliged him to go to bed by day.

Meanwhile, since the count was absent every afternoon, Fauchery established himself as the faithful escort of Comtesse Sabine. When they walked to the end of the park, he carried her folding chair and her parasol. Moreover he amused her with his extravagantly flippant journalistic wit and propelled her into one of those sudden intimate relationships tolerated in the country. She seemed not to hesitate, and felt youthful again in the company of this young man whose loud ironic remarks would not be likely to compromise her. And sometimes, when they found themselves alone together behind a bush, their eyes met. They stopped short in the middle of a laughing exchange, suddenly serious, and looked searchingly into each other's eyes as if they had plumbed the depths and had reached an understanding.

On Friday another place had to be laid for lunch. Monsieur Théodore Venot, whom Madame Hugon recalled she had invited the winter before when she was at the Muffats', had just arrived. He sat with his shoulders hunched, and affected to be nobody of any importance, appearing not to notice the uneasy deference which he was being accorded. When he had managed to shrink into invisibility, crunching little sugar lumps at dessert, he studied Daguenet as he passed some strawberries to Estelle, and listened to Fauchery recounting an anecdote which the countess was enjoying enormously. As soon as you met his eyes, he smiled in his quiet way. When he left the table, he took the count's arm and drew him out into the park. It was known that he exercised great influence over him ever since the death of his mother. Strange stories were circulating about the domination of that household by the former lawyer. Fauchery, no doubt bothered by his arrival, explained to Georges and Daguenet where his fortune had come from, an important lawsuit which the Jesuits had entrusted to him in the old days; and according to him, this fellow, a terrifying man with a placid and chubby face, was now mired in every affair that concerned the priesthood. The two young people had started to joke, for they thought the little old man was rather mad. The idea of an unknown Venot, a gigantic Venot, acting on behalf of the clergy, seemed to them wildly funny. But when Comte Muffat came back, still on his arm, very pale and with red eyes as though he had been weeping, their mirth subsided.

‘No doubt they’ve been discussing hell,’ murmured Fauchery, facetiously.

Comtesse Sabine, who had heard this remark, turned her head slowly and their eyes met—with one of those lengthy looks which they prudently gave each other before going any further.

It was the custom after lunch to repair to the far end of the flower beds on a terrace which overlooked the plain. Sunday afternoon was exquisitely mild. They had been afraid it would rain at about ten o’clock; but although the sky had not cleared, it seemed to be dissolving into a milky mist, a luminous cloud of pale sunshine. Madame Hugon suggested that they go down through the little door leading from the terrace and have a walk in the direction of Gumières as far as La Choue. She loved walking and was still in very good form for her sixty years. Everybody in any case swore they wouldn’t need a carriage. Thus they arrived in disparate groups at the wooden bridge over the river. Fauchery and Daguenet were in front with the Muffat ladies. The count and the marquis followed with Madame Hugon; while Vandeuvres brought up the rear, smoking a cigar and looking correct and rather bored. Monsieur Venot, alternately slowing down or hurrying on, was moving from one group to another with a smile as though he did not want to miss anything.

‘And poor Georges is in Orléans!’ Madame Hugon was saying. ‘He wanted to consult old Doctor Tavernier, who doesn’t get out any more, about his migraines. Yes, you weren’t up then, he left before seven. That will be a nice change for him.’

But she interrupted herself to say:

‘Goodness, why are they stopping on the bridge?’

It was true, the ladies, Daguenet and Fauchery had halted on the top of the bridge, hesitating as if something was in the way. Yet the road was clear.

‘Go on!’ cried the count.

They did not move, but were staring at something approaching that was so far invisible to the others. The road curved round and was flanked by a dense curtain of poplars. Meanwhile a muffled noise was getting ever louder, the sound of carriage wheels mixed with laughter and whipcracks. And suddenly five carriages appeared one after another, packed fit to break the axles, and a cheerful riot of bright dresses, blue and pink.

‘What on earth is all that?’ exclaimed Madame Hugon in surprise.

Then it dawned on her, she guessed, and was appalled by this invasion of the road.

‘Oh it’s *that woman*!’ she muttered. ‘Walk on, walk on, don’t look as if you...’

But it was too late. The five carriages conveying Nana and party to the ruins of Chamont were approaching the little wooden bridge. Fauchery, Daguenet, the Muffat ladies had to stand back and Madame Hugon and the others also stopped in their various groups along the road. It was a splendid procession. The laughter from the carriages had ceased. Curious faces turned to look. They all stared, amidst a silence interrupted only by the rhythmical trot-trot of the horses. In the first carriage, Maria Blond and Tatan Néné leaning back like duchesses, their skirts billowing out over the wheels, looked scornfully down on the respectable women who were on foot. After them came Gaga, taking up a whole seat, obscuring all but the anxious nose of La Faloise sitting next to her. Then came Caroline Héquet with Labordette, Lucy Stewart with Mignon and his sons, and last of all Nana, occupying a victoria* in the company of Steiner, with sweet little Zizi opposite her on the jump seat, pressing his knees against hers.

‘That’s the last one, isn’t it?’ the countess asked Fauchery, untroubled, pretending not to have recognized Nana.

The wheel of the victoria almost touched her without her moving out of the way at all. The two women had exchanged a searching glance, one of those instant appraisals, complete and definitive. As for the men, they were impeccable. Fauchery and Daguenet coldly pretended not to recognize anyone. The marquis, anxious, fearing some practical joke on the part of these ladies, had broken off a piece of grass and was rolling it between his fingers. Only Vandeuvres, who had drawn to one side a little, raised his eyes to acknowledge Lucy who smiled at him as she went by.

‘Be careful!’ Monsieur Venot murmured, standing behind Comte Muffat.

The latter, distraught, was following this vision of Nana as it floated away from him. His wife had slowly turned her head and was staring at him intently. Then he cast his eyes down as though to escape from the trotting horses carrying him away, body and soul. He could have cried out with the pain, the full realization that had come upon him when he had spied Georges entangled in Nana’s skirts. A child! It cut him to the quick to know that she preferred a child to him! He didn’t give a fig about Steiner, but this child!

Madame Hugon had not at first recognized Georges. As they crossed the bridge, he would have jumped into the river had he not been restrained by Nana's knees. Then, turned to ice, white as a sheet, he sat very still. He looked neither right nor left. Perhaps no one would notice him.

'Oh heavens!' the elderly lady exclaimed. 'She's got Georges with her!'

The coaches had passed through the middle of these embarrassed people who knew, but weren't acknowledging, each other. This delicate, fleeting encounter seemed to last an eternity. But now the wheels were rolling gaily onwards again, bearing these carriage-loads of ladies exhilarated by the fresh air, their bright bonnets and wraps floating in the breeze, the laughter and joking beginning again, as they turned to look back at the respectable folk with the cross faces, standing by the roadside. Turning round, Nana saw the walkers hesitate, then retrace their steps without crossing the bridge. Madame Hugon was leaning on Comte Muffat's arm, speechless, and so dejected that nobody dared try to console her.

'I say,' Nana shouted to Lucy, who was leaning out of the neighbouring cab. 'Did you see Fauchery, darling? He was looking daggers at me. He'll pay for that... And Paul, I treated that boy so well. Not one nod! That's how polite they are!'

And she made a dreadful scene to Steiner, who said he thought the gentlemen had behaved impeccably. So were she and her friends not good enough to doff your cap to? Was any stuck-up fellow who happened to come along allowed to treat them like dirt? Steiner was as bad as they were. That was the limit. You always ought to take your hat off to a lady.

'Who was that tall woman?' Lucy shouted across to them over the noise of the wheels.

'Comtesse Muffat,' Steiner replied.

'Ha, I thought so,' Nana said. 'Well, my dear, she may be a countess but she's not anything to write home about. I have an eye for these things, you know. Now I can tell you what she's like, as if I'd known her for ever, your countess. Do you want a bet that she's sleeping with that snake in the grass Fauchery? Bet your life she is! We women can sense that kind of thing.'

Steiner shrugged. Ever since yesterday, his ill humour had been increasing. He had received letters which obliged him to leave the next morning. And besides, it wasn't much fun coming all the way to the country to find you were sleeping on a sofa in the drawing room.

‘And poor Bébé!’ Nana went on, suddenly emotional when she noticed how pale Georges was, still tense and breathing rapidly.

‘Do you think Maman saw it was me?’ he got out finally.

‘Oh, I’m sure she did.’ She gave a little cry. ‘*But it’s my fault. He didn’t want to come but I made him...* Listen, Zizi. Would you like me to write to your maman? She looks a very reasonable woman. I’ll tell her I’d never seen you before, it was Steiner who brought you here today for the first time.’

‘No, no, don’t write anything,’ Georges said, anxiously. ‘I’ll deal with it myself. And besides, if they nag me, I just shan’t go home anymore.’

But he remained lost in his thoughts, mulling over what lies he should tell that evening. The five carriages were driving over the plain, on a straight road flanked with long rows of beautiful trees. The countryside was bathed in a silvery grey light. The ladies carried on shouting across to one another behind the backs of the coachmen who were laughing at this strange party. Occasionally one of them would stand up to see better and insisted on staying in that position until thrown back on to the seat by the jolting of the carriage. Caroline Héquet, however, was deep in conversation with Labordette and both were of a mind that Nana would be selling her house before three months were out, and Caroline was getting Labordette to buy it for her on the quiet, for a song. In front of them the amorous La Faloise, unable to reach Gaga’s engorged neck, was kissing her backbone through her dress; the cloth stretched and then ripped. Amélie sat stiffly on the edge of the jump seat and told them to stop, annoyed at sitting there like a fool watching him kiss her mother. In the other carriage Mignon, to impress Lucy, was ordering his sons to recite one of La Fontaine’s fables. Henri especially was a prodigy, he recited it all in one go, without making a mistake. But Maria Blond in the leading carriage was finally getting bored with teasing that blockhead Tatan Néné, and telling her that the creameries in Paris made eggs out of glue and saffron. It was too far, weren’t they there yet? And that question, sent across from one carriage to the next, reached Nana who, after questioning her coachman, stood up and shouted:

‘Just a quarter of an hour more. Do you see that church over there behind the trees?’

She went on:

‘Do you know, apparently the proprietress of the Château de Chamont goes back to Napoleon’s time. Oh, she was a wild one, Joseph says—he gets it from the servants at the bishop’s palace. You don’t see her sort nowadays. Now she’s got the clergy eating out of her hand.’

‘Her name?’ Lucy enquired.

‘Madame d’Anglars.’

‘Irma d’Anglars, I knew her!’ Gaga exclaimed.

Their exclamations, passing from one carriage to the next were lost in the faster trotting of the horses. Necks craned to get a view of Gaga. Maria Blond and Tatan Néné turned round and knelt on the seat, leaning on the folded hood, and questions went flying back and forth with crude remarks, tempered by a secret admiration. Gaga had known her, they were all impressed by how long ago that was.

‘Of course I was very young,’ Gaga went on. ‘But all the same I remember, I saw her go by... People said she was quite disgraceful when she was at home. But out in her carriage she looked smart as anything! And there were shocking stories, dirty, underhand goings-on you wouldn’t credit! It doesn’t surprise me she owns a chateau. She could clean out a man just by looking at him. So Irma d’Anglars is still alive! Well, my ducks, she must be pushing ninety.’

Immediately the ladies grew serious. Ninety! There wasn’t one of them, as Lucy loudly proclaimed, who would live to that age. None of them was in the best of health. But Nana declared she didn’t want to make old bones anyway, it would be more fun not to. They were reaching their destination, the conversation was interrupted by the coachmen cracking their whips and urging on the animals. But in the midst of all the noise, Lucy, abruptly changing the subject, pressed Nana to come back with the whole group next day. The Exhibition was going to close, the ladies had to get back to Paris, where the season was exceeding all expectations. But Nana was adamant. She hated Paris and did not want to set foot there again in the near future.

‘That’s right isn’t it, my love? We are going to stay here,’ she said, squeezing Georges’s knees, without paying any attention to Steiner.

The carriages stopped short. The company, taken by surprise, got down in a deserted spot at the bottom of a hill. One of the coachmen had to point out to them with his whip the ruins of the ancient Abbaye de Chamont, lost in the trees. It was a great disappointment. The ladies thought it lamentable:

piles of old stones covered in brambles with half a broken-down tower. It was not worth the bother of a five-mile journey. The coachman then pointed out the chateau and its park that started near the abbey, advising them to go along a little path by the walls. They could go round it and the carriages would wait for them in the village square. It would be a lovely walk. The party agreed.

‘Goodness, Irma has done all right for herself!’ said Gaga, stopping in front of some gates in the corner of the park by the road.

They all silently contemplated the thick foliage blocking the gate. Then on the path they skirted the wall around the park, looking up in admiration at the trees, whose tall, overhanging branches formed a dense green canopy above. Three minutes later and they found themselves in front of another gate. Through it they could see a wide lawn on which two ancient oaks cast swathes of shadow. Another three minutes and they came to yet another gate leading into an immense avenue, a dark tunnel, at the end of which the sun gleamed bright like a star. At first silent, they began to exclaim in astonishment. They made an effort to joke about it, but with a touch of envy; yet they were decidedly impressed. What a woman, that Irma! It showed you what women could do! There were more and more trees, walls with ivy creeping all over them, roofs of a lodge which rose above them, deep clumps of elms and aspens followed by curtains of poplars. Would it go on for ever? The ladies, tired of walking on and on and not seeing anything except more and more greenery every time they emerged from the trees, would have liked to see the house. They caught hold of the railings with both hands, pressing their faces against the iron bars. A feeling of awe, sustained by their distance from it, came over them as they imagined the invisible chateau in this vast domain. They were soon tired, since they never walked anywhere. And the boundary wall went on and on. At all the bends in the deserted path they saw the same string-course of grey stone. Some of them, desperate to reach the end, talked about retracing their steps. But the greater the fatigue of the walk, the greater their awe, at every step they were more impressed by the tranquil, regal majesty of the estate.

‘This is stupid,’ Caroline Héquet exclaimed grimly.

With a shrug of her shoulders, Nana made her hold her tongue. For the last little while she had been silent, rather pale, very serious. Suddenly at the final turn, the wall ended as they were coming out on to the village square and the chateau appeared at the end of a *cour d’honneur*.* They all

stopped, struck by the size and splendour of the wide flights of steps, the facade with its score of windows, the three wings built of brick interlaced with stone. Henri IV* had lived in this historic chateau, where his bedroom had been preserved and the great poster bed hung with Genoese velvet. It took Nana's breath away and she sighed like a little girl.

'Dear God!' she whispered to herself, under her breath.

But then there was tremendous excitement. Suddenly Gaga said it was Irma herself standing over there in front of the church. She recognized her at once; still upright, the old girl, and that same high-and-mighty look. They were coming out of vespers. Madame stood a moment in the porch. She wore dark brown silk, very simple and very grand, and had the venerable face of an aged marquise who had survived the horrors of the Revolution. In her right hand a thick prayer book gleamed in the sun. And slowly she crossed the square with a liveried servant in attendance walking fifteen paces behind her. The church was emptying; all the good folk of Chamont made deep bows to her; an old man kissed her hand and a woman tried to kneel at her feet. She was a mighty queen, crowned with years and honours. She went up the flight of steps and vanished.

'See what you can achieve with self-discipline,' said Mignon with authority, looking at his sons as though giving them a lesson.

Then everybody wanted to have their say. Labordette thought she was amazingly well preserved. Maria Blond made an inappropriate remark at which Lucy got annoyed and declared one ought to be respectful to the very old. They all agreed that she was wonderful. They got back into their cabs. Nana remained silent from Chamont to La Mignotte. She had turned twice to glance back at the chateau. Lulled by the sound of the wheels, she no longer felt Steiner beside her, no longer saw Georges in front of her. A vision was rising out of the dusk, Madame passed before her eyes in all the majesty of a powerful queen, crowned with years and honour.

In the evening Georges went back to Les Fondettes for dinner. Nana, who was behaving more and more strangely in her distracted state, had sent him home to ask his maman to forgive him. He must do it, she said sternly, seized with a sudden reverence for family. She even made him promise not to come back to sleep that night. She was tired and he would only be doing his filial duty by obeying. Georges, very cross with this moral stance, went back to his mother with his heart full and his tail between his legs. Luckily his brother Philippe had arrived, a very jolly, good-looking man from the

military. That cut short the scene he was dreading. All Madame Hugon did was look at him with her eyes full of tears, while Philippe, who had been put in the picture, threatened to box his ears if he ever returned to *that woman*. Georges was comforted and calculated on the quiet that he could slip away the next day at about two o'clock to arrange his visits to Nana.

However, at dinner the guests at Les Fondettes seemed ill at ease. Vandeuvres had announced he was leaving. He intended to take Lucy back to Paris, finding it rather amusing to leave with the girl he had been seeing for ten years without ever desiring her. The Marquis de Chouard, snuffling in his plate, was thinking about Gaga's young daughter. He remembered dandling Lili on his knee. How quickly these children grew up! She was developing nicely as well. But Comte Muffat was notable in remaining silent, absorbed, red-faced. He had looked long and hard at Georges. As they left the table, he went and locked himself in his room, saying he felt rather feverish. Monsieur Venot hurried up after him. And upstairs there was a scene, the count collapsing on the bed, muffling his nervous sobs with the pillow while Monsieur Venot in a gentle voice called him brother and advised him to beg for divine mercy. He did not hear him, he was moaning. Suddenly he jumped up from the bed stammering:

'I'm off there. I can't bear it any more.'

'All right,' said the old man. 'I'll come with you.'

As they went out, two shadows disappeared down a dark path. Every evening now, Fauchery and Comtesse Sabine let Daguenet help Estelle prepare the tea. On the high road the count walked so fast that his companion had to run to keep up with him. Though he was panting for breath he assailed him with the most cogent arguments against the temptations of the flesh. The other, borne along at speed into the night, did not once open his mouth, until arriving in front of La Mignotte, he simply said:

'I can't go on like this. Please leave me.'

'Well, may the will of God be done,' Monsieur Venot murmured. 'He works in mysterious ways to triumph over evil. Your sin will be one of His weapons.'

At La Mignotte there was a quarrel during supper. Nana had found a letter from Bordenave in which he advised her to rest, and seemed quite unconcerned about her. Little Violaine was getting two curtain calls every

night. And as Mignon was still urging Nana to come back next day with them, she declared in some exasperation that she hoped nobody was going to tell her what to do. Moreover at table she was holier-than-thou and made herself ridiculous. Madame Lerat had used some coarse language and she shouted that by God she would not allow anyone, not even her aunt, to make filthy remarks while she was there. She got on everyone's nerves with her fine sentiments, with a sudden burst of silly respectability, with her plan of religious education for Louiset and a whole programme of moral behaviour for herself. They laughed at her, but she uttered words of wisdom, nodding like the godliest of matrons, telling them that it was only self-discipline that led to wealth and she did not wish to die on a bed of straw. The ladies exclaimed in annoyance: they couldn't believe it, Nana was changed! But without turning a hair, she resumed her daydreams, gazing into the distance as though seeing in her mind's eye a Nana who enjoyed a vast fortune and was respected by one and all.

Everyone was going to bed when Muffat arrived. It was Labordette who spied him in the garden. He understood the situation, did him the service of getting Steiner out of the way, and led him by the hand to Nana's bedroom. Labordette was the perfect gentleman in this kind of situation, very adroit and always delighted to do a good turn. Nana did not express any surprise, she was only rather irritated by Muffat's uncontrollable passion. One had to take life seriously, didn't one? It was too silly falling in love, it didn't get you anywhere. And she had scruples because of Zizi's age; she had not, truth to tell, behaved as she should have done. But gracious, she was certainly getting back on the right path now. She was taking on an old man.

'Zoë,' she said to the maid who was more than happy to leave the countryside. 'Pack our bags tomorrow when you get up. We're going back to Paris.'

And she slept with Muffat, but without pleasure.

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CHAPTER 7

One December evening three months later, Comte Muffat was walking through the Passage des Panoramas.* The evening was very mild, throngs of folk had just packed the arcade because of a sudden downpour. People crowded in, laboriously moving forward between the shops on each side. Beneath the whitish reflections from the glass roof, the passage was ablaze with lights that poured down from the white globes, red lanterns, blue transparencies, while banks of high gas jets picked out gigantic watches and fans in their flares. The gaudy shop windows, the gold of the jewellers, the crystals of the confectioners, the light-coloured silks of the fashion shops behind pure plate glass, glittered in the glare of the reflectors, while from a distance an enormous purple glove among the garishly painted shop signs looked like a severed bleeding hand, attached to a yellow cuff.

Comte Muffat walked in a leisurely fashion back up to the boulevard. He glanced at the pavement, then slowly retraced his steps, keeping close to the shops. A damp, warm wind blew luminous mist through the narrow arcade. On the paving stones wetted by the dripping umbrellas, the constant sound of footsteps, but not voices, could be heard. Pedestrians, continually getting in his way, looked at him curiously, his expressionless face pallid in the gaslight. To escape these inquisitive eyes, the count stopped outside a stationer’s, closely studying a display of paperweights, glass balls with landscapes and flowers floating inside.

He saw nothing of all this, he was thinking about Nana. Why had she just told lies again? That morning she had written to him not to put himself out that evening, saying that Louiset was ill and she would spend the night at her aunt’s to look after him. But he, being suspicious, had gone to her house and learned from the concierge that as it happened Madame was just leaving for the theatre. This astonished him, because she didn’t have a part in the new play. So why this lie and what could she be doing at the Variétés that evening?

The count, jostled by a passer-by, moved on like an automaton from the paperweights and found himself in front of a shop window of trinkets, gazing with an absorbed expression at a display of notebooks and cigar-

holders, which all had the same blue swallow in the corner. Nana had certainly changed. In those first days after her return from the country, she had driven him mad, kissing him all over his face, his moustache, rubbing against him like a little cat, swearing to him that he was her little pet, her only darling. He was no longer afraid of Georges who was kept constantly at Les Fondettes by his mother. There only remained old Steiner whom he hoped he was replacing, but he did not dare question her too closely on this matter. He did know that Steiner was again in a terrible financial mess, close to ruin at the Bourse, clinging on to the shareholders of the Salines des Landes, trying to squeeze every last centime out of them. When he met him at Nana's, she explained in a reasonable tone that she did not want to kick him out of the house, like an unwanted dog, after all the money he had spent on her. Moreover, for the last three months the count had been living in such a state of sexual excitement that apart from the need to possess her he was unable to feel anything else very acutely. It was the late awakening of desire in him, a childish greed which did not leave any room for vanity or jealousy. One feeling only was hurtful: Nana was not so nice to him now, she no longer kissed his beard. That worried him, for he was a man who knew nothing about women and he wondered what she had against him. He was under the impression he was satisfying all her desires. And he kept coming back to the morning's letter, to that complicated lie she had told him, when she was all the time intending to spend the evening in her theatre. He was propelled along by the crowd again, and had reached the far end of the Passage, and was still wrestling with this problem as he stood outside the entrance to a restaurant, staring at the plucked larks and the huge salmon lying behind the glass.

Finally, he appeared to tear himself away from that spectacle. He gave himself a little shake, looked up, and saw that it was nearly nine o'clock. Nana would soon be out and he would demand the truth. And he moved on, remembering the evenings already spent here when he'd met her at the stage door. He knew all the shops, all the smells were familiar in the gas-filled air—the heavy odour of Russian leather, the scents of vanilla rising from the cellar of a chocolate maker, musky perfumes wafting out from the open doors of the perfumeries. He no longer dared be seen standing there by the pallid shopgirls serving behind the counter, who looked at him imperturbably, recognizing him. For one moment he seemed to be observing the line of little round windows above the shops as though seeing

them for the first time among the confusion of signs. Then he went back up to the boulevard again and stayed there for a minute or two. It was just drizzling now, and the cold drops on his hands were soothing. He was thinking about his wife who was in a chateau near Mâcon,* where her friend Madame de Chezelles had been in very poor health since the autumn. The cabs on the street were driving along in a river of mud, so it must be dreadful in the country, this awful weather. But a sudden feeling of anxiety made him return to the stifling warmth of the Passage and stride through the crowds walking there. He thought that if Nana suspected he might come, she would escape through the Galerie Montmartre.

From then on, the count kept watch on the door of the theatre itself. He did not like waiting in this area of the Passage because he was afraid he might be recognized. It was a seedy place, at the corner of the Galerie des Variétés and the Galerie Saint-Marc, with dingy shops, a shoemaker’s that never had any customers, shops with dusty furniture, a smoky reading room with shaded lamps that appeared to be dozing of an evening in their green glow. And there was never anyone in this area but patient, smartly attired gentlemen loitering outside the stage door, with drunk technicians and ragged walk-on actors. In front of the theatre one solitary gas lamp in a pale globe hung above the door. For a moment Muffat thought of questioning Madame Bron; but then he was afraid that Nana would be forewarned and escape via the boulevard. He resumed his walk, resolved to wait till they sent him away when they were about to shut the gates, something which had happened twice before. The thought of going home to sleep on his own made his heart tighten with anguish. Every time girls with long hair or men in dirty shirts came out and stared at him, he went back to standing in front of the reading room where, between two posters stuck on a window, he was confronted by the same little old man, sitting bolt upright by himself at the enormous table, in a green pool of light, reading a green newspaper in his green hands. But a few minutes before ten, another gentleman, a tall, good-looking man, with fair hair and suitably gloved, also came and hovered around outside the theatre. Both took it in turn to cast furtive, mistrustful glances at one another. The count walked on to the corner of the two galleries decorated with tall mirror glass, and when he caught sight of himself, looking so serious and dignified, he felt ashamed and afraid.

Ten o’clock struck. It suddenly occurred to Muffat that it was very easy to find out for certain if Nana was in her dressing room. He went up the

three steps, through the little yellow-painted lobby, then slipped into the yard by a door that was only on the latch. At this time of night the narrow yard, damp as the bottom of a well with its stinking latrines, its fountain, a kitchen stove, and cluttered with plants put there by the concierge, was sunk in a dark mist. But the small windows in the two high walls blazed with lights. Down below were the property store and the fireman's post; on the left, the manager's office, on the right up above, the actors' dressing rooms. In this well they were like the mouths of furnaces opening into the blackness. The count saw the dressing-room windows lit up on the first floor and, happy and relieved, he forgot his troubles and raised his eyes from the thick mud and stale smell of the backyard of this old Parisian house. Big drops fell from a broken gutter. A gleam of light from a crack in Madame Bron's window was shining yellow on a mossy cobblestone; part of the bottom of the wall was eroded by the drips from a sink; a whole corner full of rubbish, old buckets and broken earthenware, among them a stunted spindleberry in an old cooking pot provided a rare touch of green. A latch squeaked and the count fled.

Nana would certainly be coming down. He went back to the reading room. In the quiet obscurity of that place, lit only by a dim lamp, the little old man had not moved, his head bent over his newspaper. Muffat did some more walking. Now he went further off, crossing the large hall, followed the Galerie des Variétés as far as the Galerie Feydeau, deserted and cold, sunk in the sinister night; and then he retraced his steps, passed in front of the theatre, turned the corner of the Galerie Saint-Marc, and risked going as far as the Galerie Montmartre, where a machine in a grocer's shop sawing up sugar drew his attention. But after the third trip, the fear that Nana might escape behind his back made him lose all self-respect. Together he stood with the fair-haired man right outside the theatre, exchanging fraternal and humiliating looks in which there was still a spark of defiance should there be any rivalry. Technical staff who came out to smoke their pipes in one of the intervals shoved against them without either daring to protest. Three blowsy girls with unkempt hair and none-too-clean dresses appeared in the doorway, crunching apples and spitting out the pips; and the men lowered their eyes, standing there, splashed in the puddles, the butt of their bold looks and vulgar words, soiled by these trollops who thought it was funny to push one another and fall against them.

Exactly at that minute Nana came down the three steps. She went very pale when she saw Muffat.

‘Oh, it’s you!’ she faltered.

The sniggering actresses were abashed when they saw who it was. And they stood there in a row, unmoving and sobering down like servants found doing something bad by their mistress. The tall fair gentleman had stood aside, at once relieved and disappointed.

‘Well, give me your arm,’ Nana said impatiently.

Slowly they moved off. The count, who had prepared some questions, found nothing to say. It was she who rapidly made up a story: at eight she was still at her aunt’s. Then, when she saw that Louiset was a lot better, she’d had the idea of going over to the theatre for a little while.

‘Something important?’ he queried.

‘Yes, a new play,’ she replied after a moment’s hesitation. ‘They wanted my opinion.’

He realized she was lying. But the warmth of her arm leaning heavily on his own made him feel rather hopeless. He was no longer angry or bitter about his long wait, his only worry was to hang on to her now that he had got her. The next day he would try to find out what she had been doing in her dressing room. Still hesitating and visibly a prey to something inside her trying to reassert itself and come to a decision, she stopped as they turned the corner of the Galerie des Variétés outside the window of a shop selling fans.

‘Oh look,’ she said, ‘isn’t that pretty, that pearl one with the feathers!’

Then, in an indifferent tone:

‘So are you coming back with me?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said in surprise. ‘Since your little boy is better.’

She regretted having told him that. Perhaps Louiset was having another attack; and she talked about going back to Batignolles. But as he offered to come with her, she did not insist. For one moment she was livid, feeling trapped, yet obliged to be nice to him. Finally she resigned herself and resolved to gain time. As long as she could get rid of the count before midnight, it would all go the way she wanted.

‘Well, I know you’re a bachelor tonight,’ she said. ‘Your wife is only coming back tomorrow morning, isn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ answered Muffat a little embarrassed to hear her talking about the countess in that familiar way.

But she persisted, asking the time of the train, wanting to know if he would go to the station to meet her. She had slowed down again as though she was very interested in the shops.

‘Look!’ she said, stopping again outside a jeweller’s. ‘What a sweet little bracelet!’

She adored the Passage des Panoramas. It was a passion she had had from her youth for the glittering world of Paris, the false jewels, the gilded counters, the faux leather. She could not tear herself away from the shop windows, just as in the old days when, no more than a child, she had trailed around, down at heel, staring dreamily at the sweets in a confectioner’s, listening to the barrel organ in the shop next door, especially captivated by the tawdry trinkets, the little cockleshell vanity boxes, the little panniers for toothpicks shaped like those the rag-and-bone men use, the miniature Vendôme columns and obelisks* with thermometers on. But that evening she was too worked up, she looked without seeing them. She was annoyed at the curtailment of her freedom, and in her secret resentment the furious desire to do something wild came over her. She wasn’t getting anywhere with these men in high places! Like an impulsive child she had just cleaned out the Prince and Steiner, without knowing where the money had gone. Her apartment in the Boulevard Haussmann wasn’t even completely furnished, apart from the salon, which was all in red satin and clashed, it was too ornate and too full of furniture. And yet the people she owed money to were pestering her more than when she was completely broke. That was what caused her constant surprise, for she professed herself to be a model of economy. That crook Steiner had hardly been able to scrape together a thousand francs for the last month, on the days when she threatened to kick him out if he didn’t bring it. As for Muffat, he was stupid, he didn’t know what anything cost so she couldn’t be cross with him for being mean. Oh, she would get rid of all this lot if she hadn’t repeated to herself her rules for good conduct twenty times a day! You had to keep your wits about you, as Zoë said every morning, and she herself had always before her that pious memory, the regal vision of Chamont, which she constantly evoked and embellished in her imagination. And that was why, in spite of shaking with suppressed rage, she obediently took the count’s arm, passing from one shop window to the next, as the pedestrians thinned out. Outside, the

cobbles were drying, a cold wind entering the gallery was blowing away the warm air below the glass, making the coloured lanterns and rows of gas jets shake, while the giant fan looked like a blazing firework. At the door of the restaurant, a boy was putting out the lights in the globes, while in the empty lighted shops the girls behind the counters stood looking as if they were asleep with their eyes open.

‘Oh, what a darling!’ Nana said again, when they got to the last display, taking a few steps back to coo over a greyhound made of earthenware holding up its paw beside a nest hidden in roses.

They finally left the arcade, and she refused a cab. It was a very nice evening, she said. Besides they were not in any hurry, it would be delightful to walk home. Then, when they reached the Café Anglais,* she had a sudden craving for some oysters, telling him she had not eaten since the morning because of Louiset’s sickness. Muffat did not dare argue. Not yet wanting to be seen with her in public, he asked for a room, walking quickly along the corridor. She followed him, like someone familiar with the establishment, and a servant held open a door for them, when a man suddenly emerged from an adjoining room in which there was much loud laughter and shouting. It was Daguenet.

‘Goodness, it’s Nana!’ he exclaimed.

The count disappeared like a shot into the room whose door remained ajar. But as his stooping figure was vanishing, Daguenet winked and added jokingly:

‘My word, you are doing well! Picking them up in the Tuileries nowadays!’

Nana smiled and put her finger to her lips, to tell him to be quiet. She saw that he was in the mood for chatting, but was very pleased to see him there all the same, keeping a soft spot for him even though he was so vile as not to acknowledge her when he happened to be with respectable women.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked amiably.

‘Behaving myself. Actually I’m thinking of getting married.’

She shrugged as though she pitied him. But he carried on joking, saying it wasn’t any kind of life earning just about enough money in the Bourse to buy flowers for the ladies and keep up appearances. His three hundred thousand francs had lasted him just eighteen months. He was trying to be practical, he would marry into money and end up being a prefect just like

his father. Nana was still smiling, disbelievingly. She nodded towards the salon:

‘Who are you with?’

‘Oh, a whole gang,’ he replied, forgetting his plans on a sudden drunken impulse. ‘Léa’s telling us about her journey to Egypt. It’s so funny! It was all about them bathing.’

And he recounted the story. Nana, to be amiable, stayed to listen. They were by now leaning against the walls in the corridor, opposite each other. Gas lamps shone from the low ceiling, a vague smell of cooking clung to the folds in the hangings. From time to time, when the din in the salon got louder, they had to lean forward to hear themselves speak. Every twenty seconds a waiter laden with dishes tried to get past and disturbed them. Despite that, they carried on unperturbed, propping up the wall, chatting as though they were at home in the midst of the din made by the diners and the interruptions of the waiter.

‘Look,’ whispered the young man, pointing to the door of the room into which Muffat had disappeared.

They both looked. The door was shaking a little, as though agitated by someone’s breathing. Finally, slowly, slowly, it closed, without making any noise. They exchanged a silent laugh. The count must be furious all alone in there.

‘By the way,’ she asked, ‘have you read Fauchery’s article about me?’

‘Yes, “La Mouche d’or”,’* answered Daguenet. ‘I didn’t mention it in case you were hurt.’

‘Hurt, but why? It’s a really long article.’

She was flattered that she was being discussed in the *Figaro*. Without the explanations of her hairdresser, Francis, who had brought her the newspaper, she would not have realized it was about her. Daguenet studied her covertly, chuckling, teasing her. Still, since she was happy, everyone ought to be.

‘Excuse me!’ cried a waiter pushing past them with a *bombe glacée* in both hands.

Nana had moved towards the little salon where Muffat was waiting.

‘Well, farewell,’ Daguenet went on. ‘Go and find your cuckold!’

She stopped again.

‘Why do you call him a cuckold?’

‘Because he is a cuckold, for God’s sake.’

She came back again and leaned against the wall, deeply interested. ‘Oh!’ she said simply.

‘Do you mean you didn’t know! His wife is sleeping with Fauchery, my dear. It must have all started when they were in the country. Fauchery left me just a little while ago as I was on my way here and I suspect there will be a rendezvous at his place this evening. They made up some story about a trip, I believe.’

Nana was speechless with surprise.

‘I thought as much!’ she said finally, slapping her thighs. ‘I guessed, that time I saw her on the road. Is it possible that a respectable woman is deceiving her husband with that fornicator Fauchery! He’ll teach her a thing or two!’

‘Oh!’ murmured Daguenet wickedly. ‘It’s not the first time. She’s as bad as him, I daresay.’

Nana made an indignant exclamation.

‘Really! What disgusting people! A fine lot they are!’

‘Excuse me!’ cried a waiter laden with bottles, making his way through.

Daguenet drew her towards him, and caught hold of her hand a moment. He had adopted his crystalline tones, a voice like a mouth organ, such a success with the ladies.

‘*Adieu, chérie*... I still love you, you know.’

She let him go, and smiling, her words drowned out by a thunder of cries and bravos which made the door of the room shake:

‘It’s all over, that. But no matter. Come up and see me sometime. We’ll have a chat.’

Then, becoming very serious again, in the tone of a shocked bourgeoise:

‘Oh, so he’s a cuckold... Well, my dear, I find that maddening. I’ve always found cuckolds disgusting.’

When she finally went into the room, she saw Muffat sitting on a narrow divan, resigned, white-faced, his hands trembling. He did not utter one word of reproach. She was moved, halfway between pity and scorn. The poor man, betrayed and humiliated like that by his horrible wife! She wanted to throw her arms around his neck to comfort him. But all the same, it was well deserved, he was a fool as far as women were concerned. That would teach him! But pity had the upper hand. She did not let him go after eating

her oysters, as she had promised herself. They were scarcely fifteen minutes in the Café Anglais and then went back together to the Boulevard Haussmann. It was eleven o'clock. Before midnight she would have found some way of politely sending him packing.

In the hall she was careful to give Zoë her orders.

'You keep an eye on him, and tell him not to make a noise if Muffat is with me.'

'But where shall I put him, Madame?'

'Keep him in the kitchen, it's safer.'

In the bedroom Muffat was already taking off his coat. A big fire was burning. It was still the same room with its rosewood furniture, its draperies and chair-coverings of figured damask, with large blue flowers on a grey background. Nana had twice dreamed of having it redone, the first time all in black velvet, the second in white satin with pink bows, but as soon as Steiner agreed, she demanded the money from him to pay for it and then frittered it away. She had bought, on impulse, only a tiger skin for in front of the fire and a crystal lamp hanging from the ceiling.

'I'm not tired, I'm not going to bed,' she announced when they had locked the door.

The count meekly obeyed, no longer afraid of being seen. His one concern was not to cross her.

'As you wish,' he muttered. All the same, he took off his boots before sitting down by the fire. One of Nana's pleasures was undressing in front of her long mirror on the wardrobe where she could see herself from top to toe. She would let all her clothes drop to the floor, even her chemise. Then, completely naked, she would gaze at herself for ages, oblivious of all else. She was obsessed with her body, totally absorbed by it, in rapt admiration of her smooth satin skin and her slender waist. Often the hairdresser found her like that when he came in without her so much as turning round to look at him. Then Muffat got cross and she was surprised. What was he fussing about? She did that to please herself, not anyone else.

That evening, wanting to see herself more clearly, she lit six candles on the wall lights. But as she was slipping out of her chemise she stopped, momentarily thoughtful, with a question she wanted to ask.

'Haven't you read the article in the *Figaro*? The newspaper is on the table.'

She was remembering Daguenet's laugh, and she was beset by doubts. If that Fauchery had made a laughing stock of her she would get her own back.

'They are claiming he is talking about me in the article,' she said, pretending to indifference. 'What do you think, darling?'

And, after letting her chemise fall to the floor and waiting for Muffat to have finished reading the article, she was stark naked. Muffat was reading slowly. The article by Fauchery entitled 'La Mouche d'or' was the story of a young girl born of three or four generations of drunkards, her blood contaminated by a long heredity* of poverty and drink which in her case was manifesting itself as a nervous imbalance in her sexuality. She had grown up in the gutter, in the back streets of Paris. A tall, beautiful girl, with superb skin like a plant growing in a dung heap, she was avenging the wretched and the destitute from whom she had sprung. In Nana, the immorality that was being allowed to pollute the common people was rising to the surface and rotting the aristocracy. She was becoming a force of nature, an unwitting ferment of destruction, corrupting and throwing the structures of Paris society into disarray between her snowy-white thighs, churning it up, as women each month turn the milk sour. And it was at the end of the article that the comparison with the fly was made; a fly the colour of sunshine, escaped from the midden, a fly which sucks death from the carrion you are wont to see along the roads and which, buzzing and dancing, throwing out a dazzle of jewels, poisons men simply by flying in through the windows of palaces and landing on them.

Muffat looked up, and gazed at the fire.

'Well?' asked Nana.

But he did not reply. He seemed to want to reread the article. A cold sensation spread from the top of his head down his back. This article was dashed off with clever phrases, extravagant and unexpected words, and elaborate metaphors. However, he was struck by the reading, which had suddenly aroused in him all those things he had not dared admit to himself for the past several months.

Then he looked up. Nana had become blissfully absorbed in admiring herself. She had bent her head and was looking attentively in the mirror at a little brown mole she had on her right hip. And she touched it with the tip of her finger, she made it more obvious by leaning over a bit more, no doubt thinking it looked sweet and pretty in that place. Then she examined other

parts of her body, intrigued and captivated once again with the unholy curiosity of a child. It was always a surprise to her, seeing herself like that. Her expression was both amazed and fascinated, like that of a young girl who is discovering her puberty. She slowly opened her arms to reveal her voluptuous Venus-like body, she bent over, studying herself back and front, lingering over the side view of her breasts, the curve of her thighs as she moved. Lastly, she indulged in a particular balancing manoeuvre, to the right and left, her knees apart, her hips wiggling around in the continual quivering movement of an Egyptian belly dancer.

Muffat watched. She frightened him. The newspaper had dropped from his hands. In that minute of clear vision he was disgusted with himself. It was so: in three months she had corrupted his life, he already felt dirtied through and through by her in a way he would never have suspected. Everything was going to putrefy in him now. He was conscious for a moment of the effects of evil, he saw the disorder brought about by this ferment, himself poisoned, his family destroyed, a section of society that was cracking and disintegrating. And unable to take his eyes off her, he tried to let himself be filled with disgust at her nakedness.

Nana had stopped moving. Arms clasped behind her neck, she had thrown back her head, elbows splayed. He glimpsed her half-closed eyes, half-open mouth, her face wreathed in a sensual smile. And down her back, the tawny chignon had come loose and her hair was covering her like the fell of a lioness. Bent back, with her hips stuck out like that, she displayed the strong loins and firm breasts of an Amazon, muscly beneath the satin texture of her skin. A fine line, scarcely interrupted by the shoulder and the hip, ran from one shoulder to her feet. Muffat followed that lovely profile, those glimpses of pink flesh sunk in a golden light, those silky curves in the reflections from the flames of the candles. He was remembering his former horror of woman, of the monster of Holy Scripture, lecherous, smelling like a wild animal. Nana was covered in fine hair, a reddish down turned her body into velvet, but in her thighs and rump, like those of a mare, in the fleshy slopes whose deep folds and furrows veiled her sex in a troubling shadow, there was something bestial. She was the golden beast, an unconscious force, the very scent of her could bring the world to ruin. Muffat, obsessed, possessed, went on staring, to the point where, having closed his lids so as not to see it any more, the animal loomed out of the

darkness again, bigger, terrifying, even more menacing. Now it would be there in front of his eyes, in his flesh, for ever.

Nana was hugging herself. A shudder of sympathy seemed to have passed over her limbs. Tears in her eyes, she made herself small as though the better to feel her own body. Then she unclasped her hands, and lowered them, sliding them down to her breasts, crushing them in a nervous embrace. And, full of herself, she relaxed into a caressing of her whole body, rubbing first her right, then her left cheek against her shoulders, fondling them. Her greedy mouth breathed desire upon her flesh. She pursed her lips and planted a lengthy kiss on the inside of her arm, laughing at the other Nana who was likewise kissing herself in the mirror.

Then Muffat gave a long weary sigh. This solitary pleasure was exasperating. Suddenly it was as though a storm swept through him. In an upsurge of brutality, he grabbed Nana with both hands and threw her on to the carpet.

‘Leave me alone!’ she cried. ‘You’re hurting me!’

He realized he was defeated, he knew she was foolish, foul, and a liar, but he desired her all the same.

‘Oh, how stupid you are!’ she said, furious, when he allowed her to pick herself up.

Yet she calmed down. Now he would leave. After she had put on a lacy chemise, she came and sat on the floor in front of the fire. It was her favourite spot. When she began to question him again about Fauchery’s article, Muffat replied distractedly, wanting to avoid a scene. Besides, she declared that Fauchery was a pain in the neck. Then she was silent for some time, pondering how she could get rid of the count. She would have liked to be gentle with him because she was basically kind-hearted and didn’t enjoy causing people to suffer. And apart from that, this man had an unfaithful wife, a thought which had, after all, made her feel some sympathy for him.

‘So,’ she said at last, ‘is it tomorrow morning you’re expecting your wife?’

Muffat had stretched out in the armchair looking sleepy, his limbs weary. He nodded. Nana looked at him earnestly, thinking hard to herself. Sitting there in her soft crumpled lace, she was holding one of her bare feet in her hands and twisting it back and forth.

‘Have you been married for a long time?’ she asked.

‘Nineteen years,’ said the count.

‘Oh, and is your wife good to you? Do you get on well together?’

He was quiet. Then, in some embarrassment:

‘You know I asked you not to speak about these things.’

‘Why ever not?’ she exclaimed, already getting annoyed. ‘I shan’t gobble up your wife if I talk about her, will I? My dear man, all women are the same.’

She stopped, fearing she had said too much. But she adopted a superior tone because she thought she was being rather considerate. This poor man needed looking after. Anyway she’d had an amusing idea and she smiled as she studied him. She went on:

‘By the way, I didn’t tell you the story Fauchery is putting round about you... What a snake in the grass! I don’t bear him a grudge since his article may have some truth in it. But he is a real viper all the same.’

And laughing louder, letting go her foot, she dragged herself over to the count and pressed her breasts against his knees.

‘Just imagine, he swears that you were still a virgin when you got married. Were you? Is that true?’

She looked at him questioningly, she had raised her hands again to his shoulders and was shaking him to extract that confession.

‘No doubt,’ he answered gravely.

Then she dropped her arms again and in paroxysms of laughter, spluttering and giving him little pats:

‘Oh no, that’s priceless! Only you could... You are a phenomenon! But, my dear boy, you must have looked a complete idiot! When a man doesn’t know what to do, it’s always so funny! I should have loved to see that! How did it go? Tell me, oh, do tell me all about it.’

She bombarded him with questions, asking all sorts, demanding details. And she was so doubled up with laughter, her chemise slipping off and going awry, her skin golden by the huge fire, that the count confessed bit by bit what had happened on his wedding night. He was no longer embarrassed. In the end he was enjoying it, explaining, according to the polite expression ‘how he had lost his innocence’. But he was careful about his choice of words, since he still had a last shred of shame. Once embarked on her interrogation, Nana questioned him about the countess. She had a beautiful body, but she was cold as ice, he claimed.

‘Oh, come on,’ he whispered in a cowardly fashion. ‘You don’t need to be jealous.’

But Nana was not laughing any more. She went back to her place with her back to the fire, pulling her knees up to her chin. And solemnly she declared:

‘My dear man, it’s not a good idea to look a fool in front of your wife on the first night.’

‘Why?’ asked the count in surprise.

‘Because,’ she answered slowly, in a professorial manner.

She gave a wise nod of affirmation. Then she deigned, nevertheless, to explain more clearly.

‘I know how these things go, you see. Well, my dear boy, women don’t like it if you seem at a loss. They don’t say anything out of modesty, you understand... But you can be sure a lot goes on in their heads. And sooner or later when things don’t work, they will look elsewhere. So there, darling.’

He did not seem to understand, so she became more explicit. She was maternal towards him, she was telling him this as a friend, out of the goodness of her heart. Ever since she had found out he was being cuckolded, the secret was gnawing at her, she was desperate to talk to him about it.

‘Oh goodness, I’m talking about matters that are none of my business, but I’m saying this because everybody ought to be happy. We are just having a chat, aren’t we? You will be frank about it with me, won’t you?’

She broke off to change her position. She was getting burnt.

‘Oh, it’s damned hot. My back is burning. Wait, I’m going to toast my belly a bit... It’s good for aches and pains!’

And when she had turned round, with her breasts to the fire and her feet folded again beneath her legs:

‘So you don’t sleep with your wife any longer?’

‘No, I swear it,’ Muffat said, fearing a scene.

‘And you say she’s a real block of ice?’

He nodded, lowering his chin.

‘And that’s the reason you love me? Well, answer me! I shan’t be cross.’

He nodded again.

‘Good!’ she concluded. ‘I thought as much. Oh, you poor lamb! Do you know my Aunt Lerat? When she arrives, get her to tell you the story of the

greengrocer opposite her house. Just imagine that this greengrocer... Hell! This fire! I'll have to turn round again. I'm going to toast the left side now.'

As she offered her left cheek to the fire, she thought of something funny and made a joke about herself like a silly girl happy at seeing how bonny and rosy she looked in the firelight.

'Oh, I look like a goose, don't I? Yes, that's right, a goose on a spit, turning over and over. I'm really cooking in my own juices.'

She laughed out loud again, when suddenly they heard the sound of voices and doors banging. Muffat, astonished, looked at her questioningly. She became serious again, looking worried. It must be Zoë's cat, a wretched animal who was always knocking things over. Half past midnight. What had made her think of trying to make this cuckold happy? Now that the other one was there, she had to get rid of him pretty damn quick.

'What were you saying?' the count asked, to be agreeable, delighted at seeing her in such a good mood.

But in her wish to get rid of him, her mood changed like the wind, and she no longer minced her words, but got straight to the point.

'Ah yes, the greengrocer and his wife... Well, my dear, they never went near one another! She was very *keen*, if you know what I mean. But he was a clumsy fool and couldn't do it. So, thinking she was a block of ice, he went elsewhere and got off with a lot of sluts who did all kinds of filthy things with him, while she for her part did the same with men who were more savvy than her great noodle of a husband. And if you don't get along together, that's what always happens. I should know!'

Paler now, Muffat finally understood what she was getting at and tried to make her be quiet. But she was unstoppable.

'No, just hold your tongue! If you weren't such duffers, you would be as nice to your wives as you are to us. And if your wives were not such donkeys, they would take as much trouble to hang on to you as we do to get you... Instead of behaving the way they do... There, my dear man, put that in your pipe and smoke it.'

'Don't you talk about respectable women,' he said bitterly. 'You don't know the first thing about them.'

Nana got up abruptly on to her knees.

'So "I don't know the first thing about them"! But let me tell you they are not even clean, your respectable women! No, not even clean! I defy you

to show me any who dares show herself off like I am here. You really make me laugh with your respectable women! Don’t push me too far, don’t make me say things I’ll regret later.’

The count just muttered an insult under his breath. Nana went white in her turn. She stared at him for some seconds without speaking and then in a clear voice asked:

‘What would you do if your wife was being unfaithful?’

He made a threatening gesture.

‘Well, supposing I were unfaithful?’

‘Oh, you,’ he muttered with a shrug.

Nana was certainly not nasty. From the start she had resisted the desire to tell him to his face that he was a cuckold. She would have liked to make him discuss it calmly. But now he was getting on her nerves. She had to put a stop to it.

‘Well, my dear,’ she continued, ‘I don’t know what the hell you are doing here. You have been boring me silly for the last two hours. So go and get your wife, who is doing it with Fauchery. Yes, right now, in the Rue Taitbout, on the corner of the Rue de Provence. I’ll give you the address.’

Then, triumphant, seeing Muffat get up, teetering around like a poleaxed bull:

‘If respectable women are getting into this as well and taking our lovers away from us, well, they are really not doing too badly, these respectable women!’

But she was unable to go on. In a terrifying assault he had thrown her full length across the floor. He lifted his foot and was on the point of bringing it down on her head, to stop her talking. For a moment she was scared stiff. In blind fury he had started to charge around the room. At that point she was touched by his strangulated silence and his trembling struggle and her eyes filled with tears. She felt mortal regret. And, curling up in front of the fire to toast her right side, she started to console him.

‘I swear, my darling, I thought you knew. If I had realized, I wouldn’t have said anything. And anyway it might not be true. I’m not certain. Somebody told me that, and people are talking about it, but what does that prove? Oh, go on with you, you are wrong to get angry. If I was a man, I wouldn’t give a fig about women. You see women, whether highborn or low, are all alike. They are all out for a good time, every one of them.’

She was criticizing women, doing her sex down in an attempt to soften the blow. But he wasn't listening, didn't hear what she was saying. As he stamped up and down, he had put on his boots and coat again. He pounded across the room once more and then reached the door in a rush as though he had finally found the exit. Nana was very cross.

'Well, good riddance!' she said aloud, although she was now on her own. 'He's a polite man, I must say! And I was only trying to be helpful! I got over it first, surely I apologized enough, didn't I? But he was just annoying me!'

She remained in a bad mood, scratching her legs with both hands. But then she made up her mind:

'Oh well, bother it all, it's not my fault if his wife is unfaithful!'

And toasted on all sides, nice and warm all over, she dived into bed, ringing Zoë to bring up the other man, who was waiting in the kitchen.

Out in the street, Muffat walked feverishly. There had just been a fresh rain shower. He slipped on the wet cobbles. As he looked up automatically, he saw ragged clouds the colour of soot passing swiftly in front of the moon. At that time there were not many passers-by on the Boulevard Haussmann. He walked along the building sites by the Opéra,* seeking darkness, muttering incoherently. The girl was telling lies. She had made it up because she was stupid and cruel. He should have brought his foot down on her head when he had the chance. It was all too shameful, he would never set eyes on her again, never touch her again, or he would be a dreadful coward. And he breathed deeply as though he had been set free. Ah, that monster, naked, stupid, roasting herself like a goose, spitting on everything he had held in esteem for forty years! The moon had appeared and the deserted street was bathed in a white sheet of light. He was scared and started weeping, suddenly in despair, maddened, as though he had fallen into an abyss.

'Oh God,' he stammered, 'it's the end, there is nothing left.'

People were going home late along the boulevards. He made an effort to compose himself. This girl's story was haunting him still, his head was on fire. He tried to go over the facts in a rational fashion. It was the morning the countess was due to come back from Madame de Chezelles's chateau. In fact nothing would have prevented her from coming back to Paris last night and spending it with that man. He now recalled certain details of their

stay at Les Fondettes. One evening he had come across Sabine under the trees, in such confusion that she could not speak to him. That man was there then. Why would she not be in his house now? The more he thought about it, the more plausible the story seemed. He came round to finding it natural and inevitable. While he was in his shirtsleeves with that girl, his wife was undressing in her lover's bedroom. There was nothing more logical, more obvious. And as he rationalized it thus, he was making an effort to remain cool-headed. It was a feeling, ever-widening, of the fall into a carnal madness that was seizing and carrying off the whole world around him. Heated imaginings assailed him. Nana naked abruptly conjured up Sabine naked. And imagining that—the pair of them together, in the same breath of desire—he stumbled. A cab almost knocked him down on the street. Women on their way out of a café jostled him, laughing. Then, again near to tears in spite of his efforts and not wanting to start sobbing in front of other people, he hastened up a dark, empty street, the Rue Rossini, where outside silent houses he wept like a baby.

'It's over,' he said, faintly. 'There's nothing left, nothing.'

He was weeping so much he had to lean against a door, his face in his damp hands. The sound of footsteps made him move on. He felt ashamed and afraid, and it made him flee from anyone approaching, as he crept anxiously along like a nocturnal prowler. When people met him on the footpath he tried to adopt a casual pose, imagining they could read what had happened by the way he held himself. He had gone down the Rue de La Grange-Batelière as far as the Rue du Faubourg-Montmartre. The dazzling lights took him by surprise and he retraced his steps. For almost an hour he roamed the *quartier*, choosing the darkest places. He would end up, no doubt, where his feet took him, all by themselves, patiently, by a route that got ever more complicated. At last, at a bend in the street, he looked up. He had reached his goal. It was the corner of the Rue Taitbout and the Rue de Provence. He had spent an hour getting there, his head throbbing painfully, when he could have reached his goal in five minutes. One morning last month he remembered calling on Fauchery to thank him for an article about the Tuileries ball in which the journalist had mentioned his name. The apartment was on the mezzanine with little square windows half hidden behind the enormous sign over a shop. A shaft of bright light from a lamp in the last window on the left was visible behind half-closed curtains. And he

remained there with his eyes fixed upon this shaft, absorbed, waiting for something to happen.

The moon had disappeared in an inky sky and an icy fog descended. Two o'clock chimed at La Trinité.* Bright splashes of light from the gas lamps, stretching away down the Rue de Provence and the Rue Taitbout, vanished in the distance in a yellow haze. Muffat did not move. That was the bedroom. He remembered it, furnished in bright turkey-red with a Louis XIII bed at the back. The lamp was surely to the right on the mantelpiece? No doubt they were in bed, for no shadow flitted across the window; but still there was a shaft of brightness, steady, like the reflection of a night light. His eyes still lifted to the window, he was making a plan: he would ring, go up the stairs, even if the concierge called after him, stave in the doors with his shoulder, and fall upon them in bed without even giving them time to unclasp their arms. For a moment the thought that he didn't have a weapon stopped him; and then he decided he would strangle them. He went over this plan, honed it, still waiting for something, some sign, to be certain. If the shadow of a woman had appeared at the window at that moment, he would have rung. But the thought that it was possible for him to be mistaken made his blood run cold. What would he say? Doubts beset him again, his wife could not be in this man's house, it was monstrous, it was impossible.Yet he stayed, gradually overcome by a numbness, growing weaker in this long wait, and staring at the window, causing him to hallucinate.

There was a shower. Two policemen were drawing near and he had to leave the doorway where he had taken refuge. When they had vanished down the Rue de Provence, he retraced his steps, damp and shivering. Across the window there was still a shaft of light. This time he was on the point of leaving when a shadow passed across. It was so rapid he thought he must have made a mistake. But one after another, other shapes flitted past, and the whole bedroom seemed to be in a stir. Muffat, riveted to the spot once more, felt an agonizing burning pain in his stomach, as he waited to know the truth. He could see shapes of arms and legs. An enormous hand travelled across with the silhouette of a water jug. Nothing was very clear but it seemed to him that he recognized a woman's chignon. And he debated with himself: it could be Sabine's hair, except that the back of her neck looked too thick. By this time, he was desperate and did not know what to think. This dreadful uncertainty gave him such cramps in the stomach that

he drew back against the door to calm himself, his teeth chattering like a beggar's. Then, as in spite of everything he couldn't take his eyes off the window, his anger transformed itself into a moralizing discourse. He imagined himself as a Deputy, a prophet of doom, sounding off against debauchery. And in his mind he rewrote the article Fauchery had published about the poisonous fly and waded into the argument, declaring that with this Late Empire decadence, society was no longer possible. That did him good. But the shadows had disappeared. No doubt they had gone back to bed. He was still looking, still waiting.

Three o'clock struck, then four. He just could not tear himself away. When it rained, he drew back into the doorway and his legs got splashed. Nobody now was on the street. At times his eyes closed as though burned by the shaft of light on which, stupidly and inexorably, they were riveted. Twice more the shadows flitted past, repeating the same actions, carrying the gigantic jug in silhouette. And twice it all went quiet again, the lamp became a discreet night light. These dark shapes increased his uncertainty. Moreover, a sudden idea came to comfort him, putting off the moment for action. All he had to do was to wait for his wife to leave. He would recognize Sabine for certain. Nothing was easier, there would be no scandal, and he would be absolutely sure. He just had to stay where he was. Among all the muddled feelings which had agitated him, he now only felt a dull desire to know the truth. But the boredom was sending him to sleep in this doorway. To distract himself, he tried to calculate the time he'd still have to wait. Sabine was supposed to be at the station by about nine. That gave him almost four and a half hours. He was patience itself, resigned to staying there, finding something not unpleasing in the thought that his night watch might go on for ever.

Suddenly the shaft of light went out. This simple occurrence was an unforeseen disaster, something disagreeable, troubling. Obviously they had just turned out the lamp, they were going to sleep. At this time of night, that was reasonable. But he was annoyed about it because that dark window now held no interest for him. He watched it for another quarter of an hour and then, wearying, left the doorway and took a few steps along the street. He paced back and forth till five, looking up now and then. The window was still unlit. From time to time he wondered if he had not dreamed the shadows dancing on the windowpane. An immense fatigue came over him, a numbness which made him forget what he was waiting for on the corner

of this street, stumbling over the cobbles, waking again with a start and the icy shiver of a man no longer conscious of his surroundings. Nothing was worth the bother, worth worrying about. Since these people were sleeping, he had to let them sleep. What was the point of getting involved in their affairs? It was very dark and no one would ever know about these things. And then everything in him, even curiosity itself, receded, swept away by the desire to make an end, to seek consolation somewhere. It was getting colder, the street was becoming unbearable to him. Twice he went off, shuffled back again, and then moved a bit further off. It was over, it was the end, he went down to the boulevard and this time did not return.

It was a dreary trek through the streets. He walked slowly in a regular rhythm, keeping close to the walls. His heels made a tapping noise, he saw nothing but his shadow as it moved round, getting bigger, then smaller at each gas lamp. The mechanical rhythm lulled him gently as he walked. Afterwards, he never knew which way he had gone. He seemed to have been walking around in circles for hours, as if he were in a circus ring. One memory remained, a very clear one. Without being able to explain how he had got there, he found himself with his face pressed against the gate of the Passage des Panoramas, holding the bars with both hands. He didn’t shake them, he simply tried to see into the Passage, entirely possessed by his feelings. But he couldn’t make anything out, a welter of shadows ran along the deserted gallery, the wind which was sweeping down the Rue Saint-Marc blew damp air like that of a cave into his face. Yet he persisted. Then, coming out of his reverie, he was astonished, he wondered what he was looking for now, pressed like that against this gate, with such passion that the bars were digging into his face. Then, in utter desperation, he started walking again, stricken with an ultimate sadness, as if betrayed and alone from now on in all this gloom.

Dawn finally arrived, the squalid dawn that follows winter nights and is so depressing on the muddy cobbled streets of Paris. Muffat had returned to the wide boulevards under construction running round the building site of the new Opéra. Soaked by the showers, damaged by the carts, the chalky soil had turned into a muddy quagmire. And without looking where he was putting his feet, he carried on walking, slipping and sliding, then recovering his balance again. The awakening of Paris, the gangs of street sweepers and the first groups of workers, added to his anxiety as the dawn grew lighter. People looked at him in surprise, covered with mud like that, his hat soaked

through, and a bewildered expression on his face. For a long time he took refuge against the palisades amongst the scaffolding. In his emptiness one thought alone was in his head, that he was a miserable devil.

Then he thought of God. This sudden idea of divine help, of a comfort that went beyond the power of humans, took him by surprise, as though it were an unexpected, strange thing. It brought to mind the image of Monsieur Venot, he saw his small fat face, his black teeth. He was sure Monsieur Venot, whom he had pained for several months by avoiding him, would be more than happy if he knocked on his door and cried on his shoulder. In the old days God had been merciful to him. At the least chagrin, at the slightest obstacle in his life, he would go into a church, kneel down, and humble himself in his nothingness before Almighty God. And he would leave fortified by prayer, ready to abandon the treasures of this world, with the one desire for eternal salvation. But these days he only attended church in fits and starts, at those times when he was seized by the terror of hell. His moral fibre had been weakened, Nana was coming between him and his sense of duty. And the thought of God came as a surprise. Why had he not thought of Him straight away in this terrifying crisis in which his feeble human self was breaking, was collapsing?

As he laboured on, then, he looked out for a church. He didn’t remember where it was since at this early hour, the position of the streets seemed to have changed. Then as he turned the corner of the Chaussée-d’Antin, he saw La Trinité at the end, a hazy tower melting into the fog. Those white statues dominating the bare garden looked like Venuses feeling the cold amongst the yellowed leaves in a park. Beneath the porch, tired by climbing the wide steps, he stopped to draw breath for a moment. Then he went in. The church was extremely cold; its gas heater had been turned off the previous evening, among its high arches hung a fine mist which had crept in through the stained-glass windows. The aisles were in shadow, not a soul was around. Nothing but a shuffling of slippers could be heard somewhere at the back in this murky darkness; a beadle, grumpy at having to rise so early, was dragging his feet along the floor.

Muffat, meanwhile, bewildered and tearful, had bumped into a clutter of chairs, and had fallen to his knees at the grille of a little chapel near the font. He put his hands together, trying to pray, his heart and soul desiring to reach out to God. But his lips only mouthed the words, in his mind still he was out in the streets, continuing his restless trek, as though whipped on by

an implacable necessity. And he prayed over and over: ‘O God, I implore Thy help! O God, do not abandon Thy creature who delivers up himself to Thy justice! O God, I adore Thee, let me not perish beneath the blows of Thine enemies.’ There was no answer, the dark and the cold weighed upon his shoulders, the distant shuffling of slippers continued and prevented him from saying his prayers. He heard nothing but that irritating sound in the deserted church which had not even been swept that morning before it was warmed a little for the early Mass. So, he got up with the help of a chair, his knees cracking. God was not yet present. But why would he have gone to cry on Monsieur Venot’s shoulder? That man was no help at all.

And automatically he returned to Nana’s house. Outside, when he slipped, he felt tears come into his eyes, not with anger at his fate but only because he was weak and ill. By this time he was too weary, he had got too wet, and was suffering too greatly from the cold. The thought of going back to his dark house in the Rue Miromesnil made him shiver. At Nana’s, the door was not open, he had to wait for the concierge to arrive. As he went up, he smiled, already relishing in anticipation the warmth and cosiness of this nest where he would be able to stretch out his limbs and sleep.

When Zoë opened the door, she was astounded and then anxious. Madame was suffering from a frightful migraine, had not closed her eyes all night. Well... She could always go and see whether Madame had fallen asleep or not. And she slipped quietly into the bedroom while he collapsed into an armchair in the salon. But Nana appeared almost immediately. She jumped out of bed, hardly taking the time to slip on a petticoat, with her feet bare, her hair unkempt, her chemise crumpled and torn from a stormy night of love.

‘What! Not you again!’ she cried, her face red.

She rushed forward, enraged, intending to kick him out herself, but when she saw how pathetic, how broken, he was she felt a last stirring of compassion.

‘Well, you look a real mess, my poor lamb!’ she went on, more kindly. ‘What’s the matter, eh? Did you go and spy on them, did you get upset?’

He did not answer, he looked like a downtrodden beast. But she realized that he had no proof, and, to make him feel better, she said:

‘Well, you see I was wrong. I promise you your wife is an honest woman. And now, my dear, you must go home and go to bed. You need to.’

He did not move.

‘Come on now, go. I can’t let you stay here... I suppose you are not expecting to at this time of the day?’

‘Yes, I am, let’s go to bed,’ he stammered. She suppressed an urge to slap him. She was running out of patience. Was he mad?’

‘Come on now, leave,’ she urged him a second time.

‘No.’

At this she exploded, exasperated and revolted.

‘You’re disgusting! You must realize that I’m fed up to the back teeth with you. Go and find your wife who’s cuckolding you. I’m telling you now. There, have you had enough? Will you let me go?’

Muffat’s eyes filled with tears. He clasped his hands.

‘Let’s go to bed.’

Suddenly Nana lost her temper, choking with nervous sobs herself. This was downright abuse. Was this any of her business? She had surely done everything possible to educate him, out of the kindness of her heart, and now he wanted her to pick up the pieces! Well she wasn’t going to. She had a good heart, but not so good as all that!

‘Hell! I’ve had enough!’ she swore, bringing her fist down on the furniture. ‘Well! I was doing my very best not to get cross, I didn’t want to be disloyal... But my dear man, if I spilt the beans tomorrow, I’d be a rich woman.’

He looked up surprised. The thought of money had never crossed his mind. If she expressed a wish, then he would grant it straight away. His entire fortune was hers.

‘No, it’s too late,’ she replied in a rage. ‘I like men who give you presents before you ask for them. No, see, if I were offered a million for one single night, I’d refuse. It’s over. I’ve got other fish to fry. Go, or I shan’t be responsible for my actions. I might do something I’d regret.’

She advanced towards him threateningly. And in the midst of her exasperation, a good-hearted girl pushed to the limit, and convinced of her moral superiority to these fine folk who would be the death of her, suddenly the door opened and in came Steiner. That was the last straw. She gave a terrible shriek.

‘Oh no! Here’s the other one!’

Steiner, aghast at her shouting, had halted. The unforeseen presence of Muffat annoyed him, for he was afraid of the explanation he had been trying to avoid for the last three months. Blinking rapidly, he shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, avoiding the count's eyes. And he was suffering, with the red, discomposed expression of a man who has crossed Paris to bring good news and suddenly feels he has stumbled into some catastrophe.

'What do *you* want?' Nana asked rudely, calling him 'tu', with scant regard for the count's feelings.

'I... I...' he stammered, 'I've come to give you what you asked about.'

'And what might that be?'

He hesitated. The day before yesterday she had given him to understand that if he couldn't get a thousand francs to pay a bill she would no longer receive him. He had been doing the rounds for the last two days. Finally that morning he had managed to scrape enough together.

'The thousand francs,' he said in the end, taking an envelope out of his pocket.

Nana had forgotten all about it.

'The thousand francs!' she exclaimed. 'Do I ask for charity? Look! Here's what I think of your thousand francs!'

And taking the envelope, she threw it back in his face. As a careful Jew, he bent down and picked it up laboriously. He looked at the young woman, dumbstruck. Muffat exchanged a despairing look with him, while she put her hands on her hips and shouted even louder.

'Well, have you both finished insulting me? I'm so glad you have come too, my dear man, because now I'll be able to make a clean sweep. Come on now, get out!'

Then as they were in no hurry to leave, both in a state of semi-paralysis:

'So, do you think I'm being stupid? Possibly! But you've treated me too badly. Damn it all, I've had enough of being nice to people. If I'm going to perdition, then that's my own fault.'

They tried to pacify her, they implored her to calm herself.

'One... two... Are you refusing to leave? Well, take a look in here. I've got company.'

And with a sudden movement she flung open the door of her bedroom. There in the middle of the rumpled bed was Fontan. He didn't expect to be

exposed like that; his legs were in the air, his shirt flapping, and he looked like a swarthy goat sprawling in the midst of the crumpled lace. But he was used to things happening unexpectedly onstage and it did not unduly bother him. After the first shock, he made a funny face to make the best of the situation, his ‘rabbit face’, as he called it, poking out his mouth, screwing up his nose and wiggling both together. He looked like a roguish faun, but one that was vicious through and through. It was Fontan whom Nana had been picking up from the Variétés for the last week, attracted, as many girls are, by the grimaces and ugliness of clowns.

‘There!’ she said, revealing him with the gesture of a tragic actress.

Muffat, who had put up with everything until now, found this last insult unbearable.

‘Whore!’ he spluttered.

But Nana, already in her bedroom, came back to have the last word.

‘What do you mean, “whore”! What about your wife then?’

And she went in and slammed the door behind her, driving the bolt home. The two men were left alone, eyeing each other in silence. Zoë had just come in. But she didn’t hurry them, she spoke to them very reasonably. As a sensible person, she found Madame’s behaviour really too stupid. However, she stood up for her: the affair with the actor would pass; you had to let things calm down. The two men left. They said nothing. Out on the pavement, moved by a brotherly feeling, they shook hands without a word. And then they dragged themselves off in opposite directions.

When Muffat finally reached his house in the Rue Miromesnil, his wife was just going in. They met on the huge staircase whose gloomy walls gave off an icy chill. They raised their eyes and looked at each other. The count was still wearing his muddy clothes, and looked pale and agitated like a man coming back from a night of debauchery. The countess, as though shattered by a night on the train, was asleep on her feet, unkempt and with dark rings under her eyes.

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CHAPTER 8

On the fourth floor of a small lodging in the Rue Véron in Montmartre, Nana and Fontan had invited a few friends round for Twelfth Night celebrations. They were having a house-warming, as they had moved in only three days ago.

It had happened quite suddenly in the first flush of passion on their honeymoon; they hadn't planned to set up house together. The day after that stupendous row, when she had uncompromisingly kicked out the count and the banker, Nana felt her world crumbling about her. With one glance, she took stock of the situation: if she wasn't careful the creditors would come barging into her hall, poke into her private affairs, talk about selling everything; there would be disputes, endless arguments and wrangles over her few sticks of furniture. So she preferred to get rid of it all. In any case the apartment on the Boulevard Haussmann was beginning to get on her nerves. It was ridiculous, with its enormous gilded rooms. Her infatuation with Fontan had awoken visions of a bright little bedroom, reminiscent of what she aspired to when she worked in a flower shop, when her only ambition was to have a wardrobe made of rosewood with a mirror, and a bed with a blue rep counterpane. In the space of two days she had sold whatever she could salvage—trinkets, jewels—and vanished with about ten thousand francs without saying a word to the concierge; a speedy exit, and she had gone without leaving a trace. That way, men wouldn't come round and hang on to her apron strings. Fontan was very agreeable. He did not stand in her way. He let her get on with it. He even acted like a good friend to her. For his part he owned about seven thousand francs which he agreed to put with the ten thousand that Nana had, even though people might accuse him of meanness. That seemed to them a solid base for setting up home together. And they proceeded from there, both of them using their joint funds to rent and furnish the little flat in the Rue Véron, sharing everything like old friends. In the beginning it was a real joy.

On Twelfth Night Madame Lerat arrived first with Louiset. As Fontan wasn't yet back, she allowed herself to express her fears; she was very worried at seeing her niece renounce all her fortune.

‘Oh, but Aunt, I love him so much!’ cried Nana with a pretty little gesture, crossing her hands on her heart.

That speech produced an extraordinary effect on Madame Lerat. Her eyes grew damp.

‘Yes, that’s true,’ she affirmed. ‘Love is all.’

And she exclaimed at how nice the apartment was. Nana showed her the bedroom, the dining room, and the kitchen. Well, it wasn’t huge, but they had repainted it and changed the wallpaper and the sunlight came flooding in.

Madame Lerat went on chatting to the young woman in the bedroom while Louiset stood in the kitchen near the housekeeper to watch the chicken roasting. If she had any qualms, it was about losing Zoë. Zoë had stepped into the breach out of loyalty to Madame. Madame could pay her afterwards, that would be perfectly all right. And in the debacle of the apartment in the Boulevard Haussmann, she held her own against the creditors, she managed to make Nana’s absence sound respectable, salvaging whatever she could from the wreckage, telling them that Madame was travelling and had not left an address. She even deprived herself of the pleasure of visiting Madame, afraid they might follow her. However, in the morning she had hurried over to Madame Lerat’s because there was some news. The day before, some creditors had turned up, the carpet sellers, the coalman, the draper, offering to let Madame have more time and even suggesting they could advance a substantial sum of money to her if she were to return to her house and conduct herself more sensibly. Madame Lerat repeated Zoë’s words to her. No doubt there was some gentleman behind it all.

‘Never!’ declared Nana, disgusted. ‘Those tradesmen are a shifty lot! Do they think I’m for sale, just so they can settle their accounts? I’d rather die of hunger than cheat on Fontan.’

‘That’s what I told her,’ said Madame Lerat; ‘My niece obeys her heart.’

Meanwhile Nana was very annoyed to learn that they were selling La Mignotte and that Labordette was buying it at some ridiculous price for Caroline Héquet. This news made her angry with that clique, they really were very vulgar despite their airs and graces. Oh yes, she was definitely worth more than the whole lot of them put together!

‘They can laugh all they like, but money will never make them happy. And anyway, Aunt, I don’t waste my time thinking about those people. I’m too content with my lot.’

At that point Madame Maloir arrived, wearing one of the peculiar-shaped hats she specialized in.

It was delightful to see each other again. Madame Maloir was explaining that she was put off by places that were too grand. Now she could come from time to time and play bezique again. They were given another tour of the apartment. And in the kitchen, in front of the cook who was basting the chicken, Nana talked about household management, said that a maid would have been too dear and that she wanted to take care of her own home. Louiset was watching the spit with rapt attention.

But suddenly there was a sound of voices. It was Fontan with Bosc and Prullière. The meal could commence. The soup had already been served when Nana showed off the apartment for the third time.

‘Oh, my dears, this is so comfortable!’ Bosc repeated, with the sole intention of being polite to his friends who were treating him to dinner, for basically the question of a cosy home, as he said, did not concern him.

In the bedroom he carried on making an effort to be pleasant. Normally he treated women like asses, and in his cynical, drunken view of the world, the only thing capable of arousing his indignation was the idea that a man could take on the responsibility for one of these filthy creatures.

‘Oh, good for you!’ he went on, with a wink. ‘So you did this on the sly... Well, quite right too! It will be really cosy and we shall all come and call, dammit!’

But as Louiset arrived riding a broomstick, Prullière said with a wicked chuckle:

‘Gracious, have you had a baby already?’

Everyone thought that hilarious. Madame Lerat and Madame Maloir were bent double with laughter. Far from getting cross, Nana laughed, misty-eyed, and said no, unfortunately; she would have liked another baby for her little boy and herself. But perhaps they would have one anyway. Fontan, who was being nice to everyone, caught Louiset up in his arms, playing with him and talking baby-talk to him:

‘It doesn’t matter, we love our papa don’t we... Say “Papa”, you little scamp.’

‘Papa, Papa,’ babbled the child.

Everyone showered him with kisses. Bosc was irritated and suggested sitting down to eat; that was the most important thing. Nana asked whether they would mind if Louiset sat next to her. Dinner was a very jolly affair. But Bosc was suffering from having the child nearby and having to guard his plate. He didn’t like Madame Lerat either. She was becoming maudlin, whispering mysterious things, stories about high-class gentlemen who were still after her. And twice he had to move his knee out of the way, because she was feeling his leg and making eyes at him. Prullière behaved shoddily towards Madame Maloir and did not once offer her any food. He was occupied only with Nana, and seemed cross to see her with Fontan. Moreover, the two turtle doves got on everyone’s nerves in the end by kissing all the time. Against all the rules of etiquette, they wanted to sit next to each other.

‘For heaven’s sake, you’ve got plenty of time for that! Eat! Wait till we’ve gone.’

But Nana couldn’t help herself. She was rapt with love, pink-cheeked as a virgin, laughing, and her eyes swimming with tenderness... Her gaze never left Fontan, she showered all manner of tender names on him: my pet, my lamb, my sweetie. When he passed her the water or salt, she bent over and kissed him on his lips, eyes, nose, ear; and if she was reproved for doing that, she did it again surreptitiously, meekly, slyly, like a cat that has been slapped, furtively taking his hand to keep it in hers and kiss it again. She just could not keep her hands off him. Fontan, full of a smug condescension, resigned himself to being adored. His big nose was wiggling with a wholly sensual delight. With his goat face, ugly as a satyr’s, he basked in the devoted adoration of this splendid fleshy blonde. Now and then he returned the kiss, like a man who is enjoying it but who wants to show people he is being indulgent to her as well.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, you are driving us mad!’ Prullière shouted. ‘Move away from there!’

And moving his and Fontan’s plates, he changed places so that he could sit next to Nana. There was much exclaiming, clapping, and cursing. Fontan was miming a comical despair, as if he were in the role of Vulcan weeping for Venus. Immediately Prullière started to flirt with Nana, whose foot he was trying to touch under the table, but she kicked him to make him desist. No, she would definitely not go to bed with him. A month ago she had

started to fancy him, because of his good looks, but now she loathed him. If he pinched her again while he was pretending to pick up his serviette, she would throw her glass in his face.

It was a good evening, all the same. Naturally they had got round to talking about the Variétés. Wouldn't that scoundrel Bordenave ever kick the bucket? His frightful illnesses were recurring, making him suffer so much that he was like a bear with a sore head. The day before during rehearsal he had been bawling at Simonne the whole time. Now *there* was someone the artistes wouldn't grieve over! Nana said if he asked her to take on a role, she would send him packing. In any case she was talking about giving up acting; being in the theatre wasn't as good as staying at home. Fontan, who wasn't in the new play nor in the one they were rehearsing, was also exaggerating the good fortune of being completely free to spend evenings in the company of his little kitten, with his feet by the fireside. And the others exclaimed, calling them the lucky ones, pretending to envy their happiness.

The Twelfth Night cake was cut and the bean* had fallen to Madame Lerat, who put it in Bosc's glass. Then they all shouted 'The King drinks! The King drinks!' Nana took advantage of this outburst of jollity to put her arms round Fontan's neck, kissing him and whispering sweet nothings in his ear. But the young and handsome Prullière petulantly cried that that wasn't in the game. Louiset was sleeping, lying across two chairs. The company did not disperse until about one o'clock. They all shouted au revoir down the stairs.

And for three weeks the two lovebirds had a truly happy life together. Nana felt she was returning to her origins, to that time when her first silk dress had given her so much pleasure. She went out very rarely, playing at being the secluded, simple housewife. Early one morning, as she was going down to buy some fish at the market in La Rochefoucauld, she was most surprised to find herself face to face with Francis, her former coiffeur. He was dressed, as usual, immaculately, in fine linen and a spotless frock coat, and she was ashamed to be seen by him out in her dressing gown and slippers and with her hair all over the place. But he was tactful enough to be even more polite than usual. He didn't ask any questions. He pretended to be under the impression that Madame was travelling. Oh, Madame had broken a fair few hearts when she decided to go on her travels! It was a loss for everyone. In the end, however, the young woman, consumed with curiosity, forgot her initial embarrassment. As they were being pushed by

the crowd, she propelled him towards a door, and stood in front of him with her little basket in her hand. What were people saying about the fact that she'd gone? Oh, goodness me, the ladies where he went were saying all sorts. In short it had caused a great stir, a real sensation. And what about Steiner? Monsieur Steiner's situation was very precarious. If he were not able to find some new enterprise, he would come a cropper. And Daguenet? Oh, he was doing very well; Monsieur Daguenet was settling down. Nana, who was excited by all these memories, was opening her mouth to ask him yet more questions, but she was too embarrassed to utter the name of Muffat. Then Francis, with a smile, mentioned it first. It was dreadful, the count had suffered so much after Madame had left. He looked like a tortured soul, you saw him everywhere Madame could possibly have been. Well, when Monsieur Mignon had met him, he took him to his own house. This piece of news made Nana laugh a lot, though with a forced sort of laugh.

'Oh, so he's seeing Rose now,' she said. 'Do you know, Francis, I don't give a fig! You can see what a hypocrite he is! They get into the habit and can't do without it for a week! And he swore to me that he wouldn't ever have another woman after me!'

Deep down she was seething.

'She's got my leftovers,' she went on. 'Well, Rose has landed herself with a real idiot this time! Oh, I know what she's doing, she's getting her own back because I took that brute of a Steiner off her. So clever of her to bring home a man that I've kicked out!'

'Monsieur Mignon didn't say that,' said the coiffeur. 'According to him, it's Monsieur le Comte who kicked you out. Yes, and in a disgusting manner as well, with a kick up the backside.'

Nana went suddenly white.

'What?' she yelled. 'He kicked me out! Ha, that's too funny for words! My dear man, I'm the one who threw him downstairs, that cuckold! For he is a cuckold. You must know that. His countess goes to bed with anybody she can, even with that rogue Fauchery. And there's Mignon pimping for his tart of a wife that nobody wants because she's too skinny! What a disgusting lot! What a disgusting lot!'

She was choking with rage. She drew breath.

‘Oh, so that’s what they are saying? Well, Francis, my friend, I’m going to find them. Shall we both go straight away? Yes, we’ll see if they’ve got the nerve to talk about kicks up the backside. Kicks! I have never put up with that from a living soul. And nobody will ever beat me, you see, because if a man dared touch me, I’d scratch his eyes out.’

Yet she was calming down. After all, they could say what they liked, in her opinion they weren’t worth the muck on her shoes. Concerning herself with people like that would have made her feel soiled. She had a conscience. And Francis, becoming familiar, seeing her unburdening herself in this way in her housewife’s dressing gown, allowed himself to offer her some advice as he left. She was wrong to sacrifice everything on a whim; acting on a whim spoiled one’s life. She heard him out, with bowed head, while he spoke to her with a worried expression on his face like a connoisseur who was pained to see a beautiful girl like her ruining herself in that way.

‘That’s my business,’ she said in the end. ‘But thanks all the same, my friend.’

She shook his hand which was always a bit greasy, despite his immaculate dress. Then she went down to buy her fish. During the day she pondered the story of the kick up the backside. She even talked it over with Fontan, she professed to be a powerful woman who would not put up with being pushed around like that. Fontan, being of a superior intelligence, declared that all high-class men were swine and were to be despised. From then on, Nana was full of real disdain.

That very evening they went to the Bouffes* to see a little friend of Fontan’s in her debut performance in a role lasting all of ten lines. It was almost one o’clock when they got back on foot to the top of Montmartre. In the Rue de la Chaussée-d’Antin they had bought a cake, a moka, and ate it in bed because it wasn’t very warm but wasn’t worth lighting the fire. Sitting side by side with a blanket over them and the pillows piled up behind their backs, they were having supper and chatting about the actress. Nana thought she was plain-looking and lacked style. Fontan, turning over on to his front, passed the slices of cake placed on the edge of the bedside table in between the candle and the matches. But they ended up quarrelling.

‘Oh, she’s a real fright!’ cried Nana. ‘She’s got gimlet eyes and dirty blonde hair.’

‘Be quiet!’ Fontan replied. ‘She has splendid hair and flashing eyes. You women are always doing down one another!’

He seemed vexed.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, that’ll do!’ he pronounced in the end in an angry voice. ‘You know very well I don’t like people annoying me. Let’s go to sleep or we shall have a row.’

And he blew out the candle. But Nana was furious and wouldn’t stop. She wouldn’t have people taking that tone with her. She was used to some respect. As he did not answer, she had to stop. But she couldn’t sleep, she tossed and turned.

‘For God’s sake, will you stop wriggling around?’ he shouted, suddenly sitting up.

‘It’s not my fault if there are crumbs in the bed,’ she snapped back.

It was true, there were crumbs. She felt them even under her bottom, she itched all over. One single crumb was sticking into her and making her scratch herself till she drew blood. When you eat cake, don’t you always shake the blanket anyway? White with rage, Fontan had lit the candle. They both got up. And barefoot, in their nightclothes, throwing back the covers, they brushed away the crumbs on the sheet with their hands. Fontan was shivering and climbed back into bed again, telling her to go to hell because she was saying he ought to wipe his feet properly. Finally she got back in herself. But she had hardly lain down when she started wriggling around again. There were still some crumbs.

‘Damn, I knew it!’ she repeated. ‘You brought them in again on your feet. I can’t be doing with that, I tell you. I just can’t!’

And she made to climb over him to get out of bed. Then, fed up to the back teeth and wanting to sleep, Fontan gave her a good slap. The blow was such that straight away Nana found herself lying down again with her head on the pillow. She lay there dazed.

‘Oh,’ she said with a big gasp, like a child.

A moment later he threatened her with another slap, enquiring if she was going to move again. Then, having blown out the candle, he stretched out comfortably on his back and started snoring immediately. And with her face in the pillow, she sobbed in silence. It was so cowardly of him to exercise his strength in that way. But she had become really terrified of him, the comical face of Fontan had changed into something very scary. And her

anger dissolved as if the slap had calmed her down. He had made her respect him and she squeezed up against the wall on her side of the bed in order to leave him enough room. In the end she even managed to fall asleep, her cheeks burning and eyes brimming but in such a pleasurable state of exhausted surrender that she couldn't feel the crumbs any more. In the morning when she woke, she held Fontan in her naked arms very tight against her breasts. And he wouldn't do that again, would he? Never, never? She loved him too much. Though it was even nice being slapped, as long as it was by him.

Then a new life began. Fontan slapped her whenever he felt like it. She grew used to it and took it in her stride. From time to time she shouted and threatened him, but then he would pin her against the wall and talk of strangling her, which made her submissive. More often than not, she would collapse on to a chair and sob for five minutes. Then she would forget, singing and laughing and rushing round the apartment with her skirts flying. The worst thing was that now Fontan would vanish for the whole day and never return before midnight. He went to the cafés where he met his cronies. Nana put up with it all, tremblingly, lovingly, with the one fear of not seeing him come back any more if she reproached him for anything. But some days when she had neither Madame Maloir, nor her aunt and Louiset, she was bored to death. So one Sunday, as she was at the La Rochefoucauld market in the process of bargaining over some pigeons, she was delighted to bump into Satin who was buying a bunch of radishes. Since that evening when the Prince had drunk Fontan's champagne, they had lost touch with one another.

'Heavens, it's you! Do you live round here then?' said Satin, astonished to see her in slippers in the street at that time of day. Oh, my dear girl, so you've gone down in the world!'

Nana shut her up with a frown because other women were there in their dressing gowns with nothing on underneath, their hair loose and white with bits of fluff. In the morning, as soon as the man from the previous night had left the house, all the local women came there to do their shopping, eyes heavy with sleep, trailing around in a bad temper and tired after a night of being pestered. They came from every direction, every street which led to the market, some very pale, still young and attractive in their casual clothes, others old and blowsy and exposing their flabby flesh, not caring if they were seen like that outside their working hours. On the pavements passers-

by turned to look at them, but not one of the women deigned to smile, as they went about their business with the disdainful air of housewives for whom men no longer existed. At that precise moment as Satin was paying for her bunch of radishes, a young man, somebody late to work, threw her an ‘Evening, darling’ as he passed. Straight away she drew herself up like an offended queen, saying:

‘Whatever’s the matter with that bastard?’

Then she thought she recognized him. Three days before, near midnight, going up the boulevard again on her own, she had talked to him for nearly half an hour at the end of the Rue La Bruyère, trying to persuade him. But that only served to increase her disgust.

‘They are such swine to shout out things like that in the middle of the day,’ she went on, ‘when all you are doing is going about your own business. You want people to have some respect for you.’

Nana had ended up buying the pigeons, though she was not sure how fresh they were. Then Satin wanted to show her where she lived, nearby, in the Rue La Rochefoucauld. And as soon as they were on their own, Nana told her about her passion for Fontan. Once arrived at her own door, Satin stood outside with her bunch of radishes under her arm, excited by a final detail in Nana’s story, who was telling lies herself, swearing that she had kicked Comte Muffat hard up his backside.

‘Marvellous! *Kicked* him!’ Satin exclaimed. ‘And I bet he didn’t say anything? Coward! I wish I’d been there to see his face! You are right, my dear. And damn the money! When I’ve fallen for somebody, I am head over heels! Come and see me, will you? Promise? The left-hand door. Knock three times, because there are always undesirables hanging about.’

From then on, when Nana was very bored she went over to see Satin. She was always sure of finding her, since she never went out before six. Satin lived in two rooms which had been furnished for her by a pharmacist to protect her from the police. But in less than thirteen months she had broken the furniture, damaged the seats, soiled the curtains in such a frenzy of filth and untidiness that the lodging looked as if it was inhabited by a pack of crazy cats. On the mornings when, disgusted at herself, she took it into her head to clean the place, the bars on the chairs and bits of curtains came loose in her hands from her struggles to get rid of the filth. On those days it was dirtier than ever and you couldn’t get in because of things fallen down and blocking the doorways. So in the end she gave up trying to keep

house. In the lamplight the wardrobe with the mirror, the clock, and what remained of the curtains still kept up appearances for her clients. In any case the landlord had been threatening her with eviction for the last six months, so why should she bother keeping the place in good order? Not for that swine anyway! And when she got up in a feisty mood, she would shout ‘Gee up, you old nag!’ and give the sides of the wardrobe and the chest of drawers a hefty kick that made them crack.

Almost always, Nana found her in bed. Even on those days when Satin went down for her shopping, she was so tired when she went up to her rooms again that she threw herself down on the bed and fell asleep. In the daytime she sat around, half asleep on the chairs, and only recovered towards evening when the gas was lit. And Nana felt very comfortable in her rooms, sitting doing nothing, in the middle of the unmade bed, basins lying around the floor, dirty petticoats from the night before that left mud on the armchairs. They chattered nineteen to the dozen, exchanging confidences, while Satin sprawled on the bed with her feet up higher than her head, listening and smoking cigarettes. Sometimes in the afternoons when they were depressed, they ordered an absinthe to drown their sorrows, as they said. Without going downstairs or even putting on an underskirt, Satin would go and lean over the banisters and shout an order to the concierge’s little daughter, a child of ten, who, bringing up glasses of absinthe, would shoot furtive looks at the woman’s bare legs. All conversation ended up with talk about how disgusting men were. Nana went on and on about Fontan. She could not say a dozen words without coming back to her litany of what he had said or done. But Satin, like the kind soul she was, listened attentively to these never-ending tales of waiting for him at the window, quarrels about a burnt stew, the making-up in bed after hours of sulking in silence. In her need to talk, Nana had ended up telling her about all the slaps she got; the week before he had given her a black eye; the day before, when he had lost his slippers, he had flung her against the bedside table; and the other girl wasn’t at all surprised, blowing out her smoke, only desisting to observe that she always ducked out of the way, which sent the man who hit her flying. They would settle down happily, the two of them, to recount their tales of blows, their heads full of the same stupid facts repeated ad infinitum, as they gave themselves up to the warm, comforting feeling of talking about their outrageous treatment. It was the pleasure of reliving Fontan’s brutality, of talking about him in every

detail even down to the way he took off his boots, which brought Nana back every day, and all the more so when Satin consoled her with citing even worse examples: her pastry-cook had left her for dead on the floor, but she loved him just the same. Then some days Nana would be crying, declaring that she could not go on like that. Satin would go back home with her and stay for an hour outside in the street to make sure Fontan wasn't murdering her. And the next day the two women enjoyed the scene of reconciliation the whole afternoon, yet preferring, without actually admitting, the days when there were thrashings to talk about, because they found it more exciting.

They became inseparable. But Satin never went to Nana's place, Fontan declaring that he didn't want a whore in his house. They went out together and it was thus that Satin introduced her friend to a woman, Madame Robert, who interested Nana and inspired in her a certain deference since she had refused to come to her dinner party. Madame Robert lived in the Rue Mosnier, a quiet new street in the Quartier de l'Europe,* with no shops, and where the big houses with tiny apartments were occupied by ladies. It was five o'clock. Along the deserted pavements outside, in the peaceful aristocratic atmosphere of the tall white houses, bankers' and merchants' barouches were drawn up, and men walked rapidly in, raising their eyes to the windows where women seemed to be waiting in their peignoirs. At first Nana did not want to go up, saying primly that she didn't know the lady. But Satin was adamant; you could always bring along a friend. She only wanted to pay a courtesy call. Madame Robert, whom she had bumped into the day before in a restaurant, had been very friendly, making her promise faithfully to come and see her. And in the end Nana had agreed. Upstairs, a little maid, half asleep, told them that Madame wasn't back. But she was happy to show them into the drawing room, and left them there.

'Heavens, how elegant!' murmured Satin.

The apartment was plainly hung with a dark material in the bourgeois manner, suggesting the conservative taste of a Parisian shopkeeper who has retired after making his fortune. Nana, impressed, tried to crack jokes, but Satin got cross, answering for Madame Robert's irreproachable morals. You always saw her in the company of one or other elderly, important man who would politely give her his arm. She was currently seeing a former chocolate manufacturer, a serious-minded person. When he arrived,

charmed by the aristocratic atmosphere of the house, he always had himself announced and called her his little girl.

‘Oh look, this is her!’ Satin said, pointing to a photograph stuck in front of the clock.

Nana looked for a moment at the portrait. It showed a woman with very dark hair and a long face, pursed lips, and a discreet smile. You would have said she was quite the society lady, but rather more reserved.

‘That’s funny,’ she muttered finally. ‘I have definitely seen that face somewhere. Where? I don’t know. But I’m sure it wasn’t somewhere respectable. No, it definitely wasn’t somewhere respectable.’

And she added, turning to her friend:

‘So she made you promise to come and see her. What does she want you for?’

‘What does she want me for? Heavens, to have a chat I suppose. To see me for a minute or two. She’s only being polite.’

Nana stared at Satin, then clicked her tongue. Well, it was of no concern of hers. But as this lady was keeping them waiting, she declared she wouldn’t stay any longer, and they left together.

The next day Fontan told Nana that he would not be back for dinner, so she went over early to fetch Satin and take her out for a meal. It was a big decision as to which restaurant. Satin suggested a few brasseries which weren’t to Nana’s taste at all. Finally she persuaded her to eat at Laure’s place in the Rue des Martyrs, where dinner cost three francs.

Bored with waiting for it to be time and not knowing what to do out in the street, they went up to Laure’s twenty minutes early. The three dining rooms were still empty. They sat down at a table in the very same room as Laure Piédefer who was enthroned on the high bench behind the bar. This Laure was about fifty years old, her floppy figure squeezed into belts and corsets. Women arrived one after the other, lifted themselves up and, leaning over the crockery on the counter, kissed Laure on the mouth with affectionate familiarity, while this damp-eyed monster of a woman did her best to share her favours so as not to make anyone jealous. The waitress who was serving these ladies, on the other hand, was tall, thin and haggard, with blackened eyelids and dark flashing eyes. The three dining rooms filled up rapidly. Scores of customers were scattered around the tables, most of them nearing forty, enormous, fleshy, dissolute creatures with soft puffy

lips. But in the midst of these bulging breasts and stomachs, some slim, pretty girls could be seen, still innocent-looking beneath their bold exterior, novices snapped up on some dance hall and brought to Laure's by a woman client, where the numerous corpulent women, excited by this whiff of youthful flesh, were elbowing their way through and paying court to them like old men, offering sweet treats. As for the males, there were very few, ten or fifteen at the most, all rather meek-looking among the invading deluge of skirts, apart from four big men, very much at ease, who were making fun of the women, having come expressly for that purpose.

'The food looks very good, doesn't it?' Satin said.

Nana nodded, satisfied. It was the sort of good old-fashioned dinner you find in a hotel in the provinces: vol-au-vents with mushroom sauce, chicken with rice, haricot beans in gravy, caramel cream. The ladies especially delved into the chicken and rice, bursting out of their corsages, wiping their lips slowly. At first Nana had been afraid she would meet old friends who might ask her silly questions, but she relaxed when she couldn't see anyone she knew in this very mixed company, where faded dresses and pitiful hats could be seen side by side with luxurious outfits in this sisterhood of shared perversions. For one moment a young man with short curly hair and an insolent face caught her eye as he kept a whole table of grossly fat girls breathless and hanging on his every word. But when the young man laughed, his bosom swelled.

'Good heavens, a woman!' Nana gave a little cry.

Satin, who was stuffing her mouth with chicken, looked up to mutter:

'Oh yes, I know her... *Très chic!* They all fight over her.'

Nana made a face. She could not yet make head or tail of all this. However, she said in a reasonable voice that there was no accounting for taste and you could never tell what you might like one day. So she got on with her caramel cream philosophically, well aware that Satin was creating a stir on the tables round about with her big blue virginal eyes. One woman in particular, a big blonde sitting close to her, was very friendly. She was getting bolder and so insistent that Nana was on the point of saying something.

But, at that moment, to her great surprise a woman came in whom she recognized. It was Madame Robert, looking like a sweet little brown mouse. She nodded familiarly to the tall thin blonde and then went to lean

on Laure’s bar. They kissed, at great length. Nana found this kiss very bizarre on the part of such a distinguished woman, all the more so since Madame Robert did not look in the least modest now; quite the opposite in fact, as she glanced around the room, chatting in a low voice. Laure had just sat down again, bulked once more now with all the majesty of an ancient idol of vice, her face worn and polished by the kisses of her loyal followers. And above the loaded plates, she reigned over her fat, bloated clientele, monstrous compared with the very biggest of them, enthroned in her fortune, enjoying the rewards of forty years running her restaurant.

Madame Robert had seen Satin. She left Laure, hastened over to her, and was the epitome of charm, saying how sorry she was not to have been at home the day before. And as Satin, won over, insisted on moving up to make room for her, she swore she had already dined. She had just come up now to see who was here. As she spoke, standing behind her new friend, she leaned on her shoulders, smiling and seductive, repeating:

‘Let’s see, when shall I see you? Are you free...’

Unfortunately Nana could hear no more. This exchange got on her nerves, she was dying to tell this so-called respectable woman a few home truths. But the sight of a gaggle of women arriving stopped her in her tracks, chic, dressed to the nines, wearing diamonds. They had come in a group to Laure’s, whom they all treated as an old friend, seized by a perverse desire to dine there for three francs a head while simultaneously displaying a hundred thousand francs’ worth of jewellery on their persons, much to the envy and surprise of the poor street girls. When they had come in, with loud, ringing laughter, bringing with them a ray of sunshine from outdoors, Nana had turned her head, very cross to see Lucy Stewart and Maria Blond among their number. For almost five minutes, the whole time these women were chatting to Laure before going into the adjacent dining room, she kept her head down, pretending to be very busy rolling breadcrumbs on the tablecloth. When she finally looked up, she was astounded: the chair next to her was empty. Satin had vanished.

‘Where has she gone then?’ she said aloud.

The big blonde woman who had been showering Satin with attentions, gave an aggrieved laugh. And when Nana, irritated by this laugh, looked at her threateningly, she answered in a soft drawl:

‘Well, *I* didn’t take her, it was that other woman.’

Then Nana, realizing they would make fun of her, said nothing more. She even sat there a while longer, not wanting to let it be seen how angry she was. At the back of the other dining room, she could hear Lucy Stewart entertaining an entire table of young girls, who had come down from the dance halls in Montmartre and La Chapelle.* It was very hot, the waitress was bearing off piles of dirty plates, with their powerful smell of chicken in rice, while the four men were now at half a dozen tables, pouring out fine wine to the women there in the hope of getting them drunk and hearing some lurid details. Now what infuriated Nana was that she was paying for Satin's dinner. The wretched girl enjoyed herself at your expense and then went off with the first bitch that came along and without a word of thanks! Of course it was only three francs but all the same it was too bad of her, and the way she did it was disgusting. Nevertheless Nana paid up, throwing six francs down in front of Laure, who, in her eyes, was not fit to lick her boots.

In the Rue des Martyrs Nana could feel her resentment growing. She was certainly not going to run after Satin and poke her nose into her dirty business! But her evening was spoilt and she went back up to Montmartre, feeling most of all angry at Madame Robert. That woman, for God's sake, she had a bloody cheek, lording it like that. Yes, lording it, she might be, but on the dunghill! Now she was certain she had met her in Le Papillon, a seedy place in the Rue des Poissonniers where men picked her up for thirty sous. And she got her claws into top civil servants, if you please, with her self-effacing airs, and she refused dinners which she had the honour of being invited to, making out she was a respectable woman, for heaven's sake! Respectable woman, my foot! It was always prudes like her who did it time and time again in sordid little back rooms without anyone knowing.

Meanwhile Nana, mulling all this over, had arrived home in the Rue Véron. She was rather alarmed to see the light on. Fontan, who had also been dumped by the friend who had paid for his dinner, was coming home in a bad mood. He listened unsympathetically to her explanations; she was afraid he would hit her, frightened to see him there when she wasn't expecting him until one in the morning. She told a lie, she admitted she had spent six francs, but that she had been with Madame Maloir. Then with composure he passed over a letter addressed to her, which, without any qualms, he had opened. It was a letter from Georges, still locked up at Les Fondettes, taking some comfort every week from writing passionate letters

to her. Nana adored receiving letters, especially those containing high-flown phrases swearing eternal love. Fontan knew Georges's style and admired it. But that evening she was so worried about him making a scene that she affected indifference. She skimmed through the letter, looking sullen, and put it to one side. Fontan had started drumming on the window, fed up with having to go to bed so early, not knowing how to spend the evening. Suddenly he turned round.

'Supposing we answer that kid straight away,' he suggested.

He was normally the one who wrote an answer. He put a great deal of effort into his style. Then he was delighted when Nana, enthusiastic when he read out his letter, would kiss him, crying that only he could invent things like that. It ended up exciting them both in their mutual adoration.

'If you like,' she agreed. 'I'll make some tea, and then we'll go to bed.'

Fontan settled down at the table, and making a great fuss got out his quill, ink, and paper. He bent his elbow and stuck out his chin.

'Dear Heart,' he began, aloud.

And for more than an hour he applied himself, hesitating occasionally over a word, head in hands, refining his language, chuckling to himself when he had hit upon a particularly affectionate turn of phrase. Nana had already got through two cups of tea without speaking. Finally he read the letter as if reading a script in the theatre in a flat voice, indicating some gestures. In five pages he talked about the 'delightful hours spent at La Mignotte, those hours whose memories linger like subtle perfumes'; he swore 'to be eternally faithful to this springtime of love' and ended by declaring that his only wish was to 'renew this happiness, if happiness can be renewed'.

'I'm saying all of this because I'm being polite, you realize,' he explained. 'It's all a joke, isn't it? But I think I've got it just about right, don't you?'

He was crowing with delight. But Nana, unsure of how to react, and still on her guard, made the mistake of not throwing her arms around his neck and exclaiming aloud. She thought the letter was good, but no more than that. Then he got very cross. If she didn't like his letter, she could write another. And instead of kissing, as they usually did, and saying affectionate things to one another, they remained apart, one on each side of the table. But she had poured him a cup of tea.

‘Ugh, this is disgusting!’ he cried wetting his lips. ‘Did you put salt in it or something!’

Tactlessly, Nana simply shrugged. He was furious.

‘Ah, things aren’t going well tonight.’

And then the row started. It was only ten by the clock, it was a way of killing time. He whipped up his anger, he threw all sorts of accusations at Nana, cursing and swearing at her relentlessly without allowing her to answer back. She was dirty and stupid, she had slept around all over the place. Then he got worked up about the issue of money. Did *he* spend six francs when he went out to eat? He was taken out to dinner, and failing that, he would have made do with stew at home. And she had spent it on that old pimp Maloir, into the bargain, an old nag he would kick out of his house the very next day! Oho! They wouldn’t get very far if they both threw away six francs every day!

‘I need to see your accounts anyway!’ he shouted. ‘Come on now, give me some money. How much do we have?’

All his base avaricious instincts came to the fore. Nana, cowed, scared, hastened to take the remaining money out of the desk and lay it in front of him. Until then the key had been kept in the common chest and they took what they wanted out of it.

‘What!’ he said after counting. ‘There are scarcely seven thousand francs left out of seventeen, and we’ve only been together for three months. I don’t believe it!’

He rushed forward, gave the desk a shake and brought the drawer over so that he could go through the contents under the light. But there were indeed only six thousand eight hundred and odd francs. The storm broke.

‘Ten thousand in three months!’ he bellowed. ‘For God’s sake! What have you done with them? Eh? Answer me! Is it all going to that old bag of an aunt of yours? Or are you paying for men? Is that it? Well, what do you say?’

‘Oh, if you are going to get mad at me!’ said Nana. ‘It’s very easy to see where it’s gone. You’re not counting what we spent on the furniture; and besides I needed underclothes. It goes quickly when you first move in.’

But although he demanded explanations, he didn’t listen to her.

‘Well, it’s going far too quickly,’ he went on, more calmly. ‘And, my dear, I’ve had enough of sharing the housekeeping. As you know, that seven

thousand belongs to me. Well, I have it and so I shall keep it. Damn it, if you are going to throw money away, I don't want to be in the poorhouse. Each to their own.'

And with a lordly gesture he put the money in his pocket. He went on in a more kindly tone of voice:

'I'm not so stupid, you know, as to provide for aunts and kids who don't belong to me... You choose to spend your money how you like, that's your business; but mine is sacred! When you cook a leg of lamb, I'll pay you half. In the evenings we'll settle up, and call it quits!'

Nana was disgusted by this nastiness. She couldn't help shouting:

'You got through all my ten thousand! You're a filthy swine!'

But he did not wait to argue any more. He leaned over the table and slapped her face as hard as he could, saying:

'Just say that again!'

She repeated it in spite of the slap and he fell on her, hitting and kicking her. Soon she had been brought to such a state that she ended up as usual, getting undressed and going to bed in tears. He was breathing fast. He was getting into bed too, when he caught sight of the letter he had written to Georges on the table. He folded it carefully and turned to the bed, saying in a threatening tone:

'It's a good letter. I'll put it in the post myself because I don't like folk you can't trust. And don't keep moaning, you're getting on my nerves.'

Nana, crying and sighing simultaneously, held her breath. When he was in bed, she choked and threw herself on to his chest, sobbing. Their set-tos always ended like that. She was terrified of losing him, like a coward, she needed to know he belonged to her in spite of everything. Twice he repulsed her with a majestic gesture. But the warm arms of this woman with her big wet eyes like a faithful dog's made him desire her. And he accepted her caresses with a lordly grace, though not stooping to make any advances himself. He allowed himself to be kissed and to renew his strength like a man whose forgiveness is worth the winning. Afterwards, a worrying thought crossed his mind: he was afraid Nana was play-acting in order to get the key to the cash box. The candle had already been put out when he felt he must repeat what he had said.

'You know this is a serious matter, my girl. I'm keeping the money.'

As she was falling asleep with her arms around his neck, Nana's reply was magnificent:

'Yes, don't worry. I'll work.'

But from that evening on, life together became more and more difficult. From one week's end to the next, there was the noise of him hitting her, regulating their lives like a clock. By dint of being beaten, Nana's body took on the smoothness of fine linen; her skin grew more delicate, like peaches and cream, so soft to touch, and so pleasing to look at, she was even more beautiful. Prullière was mad to get her to bed, coming when Fontan wasn't at home, pushing her into corners to kiss her. But she fended him off immediately, indignant and blushing with shame. She thought it disgusting that he would deceive a friend like that. Then Prullière laughed in a vexed fashion. She was being stupid, for God's sake! How could she grow attached to an ape like Fontan? For when all was said and done, Fontan looked just like an ape with his big nose twitching away. What an ugly mug! And a man who beat her, into the bargain!

'Possibly, but I love him the way he is,' she replied one day in the calm tone of a woman admitting her dreadful taste.

Bosc was content to invite himself to dinner there as often as possible. Behind Prullière's back, he shrugged as if to say: a pretty boy, but rather superficial... Bosc had been present several times at these domestic scenes. At dessert when Fontan slapped Nana, he carried on munching gravely, finding it all quite normal. To pay for his dinner, he always went into ecstasies over how happy they were. He claimed to be a philosopher, to have given up everything, fame included. Prullière and Fontan, leaning back on their chairs, sometimes forgot they were at the table after it had been cleared, and boasted to each other until two in the morning about their successes, gesticulating and projecting their voices, as if onstage. Bosc, absorbed, was finishing the bottle of cognac on the quiet, and only uttering small disapproving sounds from time to time. What remained of Talma* now? Nothing, so why didn't the wretched people leave him alone, for God's sake.

One evening he found Nana in tears. She took off her bodice to show him her back and her arms covered in bruises. He looked at her skin, without being tempted to take advantage of the situation, as that fool of a Prullière would have done. Then, sententiously he proclaimed:

‘Wherever there are women, my dear girl, there are beatings. I think it was Napoleon who said that. Wash yourself with salt water. Salt water is excellent for bruising. Go on with you, you will have plenty more, so don’t complain, as long as nothing’s broken. I am going to stay to dinner, if that’s all right, I saw a leg of lamb in the kitchen...’

But Madame Lerat did not share this view of life. Every time Nana showed her a new bruise on her white skin, she shrieked. He was killing her niece, it couldn’t go on like this. Fontan had actually kicked Madame Lerat out, saying that he did not want her to come to his house, so from that day on when she was there and he was about to arrive, she had to leave through the kitchen door, which she found dreadfully humiliating. She ranted on and on about this vulgar person. She blamed him most of all for his rudeness, putting on her prim and proper face to indicate that no one could say she herself had not been well brought up.

‘Oh, you can see it straight away,’ she said to Nana. ‘He hasn’t got the least idea about manners. His mother must have been a common person. Don’t say she wasn’t, you can always tell! I’m not saying it because of how he treats me, though somebody my age has the right to a bit of respect. But you, how on earth do you put up with his bad manners? For, though I say it myself, I always taught you to behave and gave you the best advice. That’s true, isn’t it? We were all well brought up in our family.’

Nana did not argue with her, but hung her head as she listened.

‘And besides,’ went on her aunt, ‘you only knew high-class people. In fact Zoë and I were just talking about that yesterday. She doesn’t understand it either. She said, “How could Madame, who had such a perfect gentleman as Monsieur le Comte eating out of her hand”— for, between ourselves, it seems you drove him half crazy—“how can Madame allow herself to be knocked around now by this buffoon?” I added that you might put up with a beating or two but if I were in your place, I could never permit the lack of respect. There’s nothing in the least nice about him. I wouldn’t have him in the house. And you are ruining yourself because of a type like that! Yes, ruining yourself, darling, you are wearing yourself out, when there are so many, and richer, men, not to mention government ministers... Well, enough said. I’m not the one who ought to be telling you things like that, but as soon as the swine starts anything, I’d face up to him and say: “Monsieur, what do you take me for?” You know, in your haughtiest voice, that would show him!’

Then Nana burst into tears, stammering:

‘But Aunty, I love him!’

The truth was that Madame Lerat felt rather worried when she saw her niece finding it increasingly difficult to hand over the twenty sous, as she did from time to time, to pay for little Louis’s keep. Of course she would not let her down, she would still look after the child and wait until the situation improved. But the idea that Fontan was the reason she, the boy, and his mother were not rolling in money, infuriated her to such an extent that she wanted no talk of love. So she brought the conversation to a close with these stern words:

‘Listen, one day when you are skint and he’s half murdered you, you’ll come knocking on my door and I’ll let you in.’

Soon money became Nana’s chief worry. Fontan had hidden the seven thousand francs. Probably they were in a safe place but she would never have dared ask him, for she shrank from confrontation with this ‘bad lot’ as Madame Lerat called him. She was terrified he might think she was staying with him just for his money. He had promised faithfully that he would provide for the housekeeping and for the first few days he gave her three francs every morning. But because he was paying, he demanded a great deal in return. He expected the three francs to cover everything, butter, meat, vegetables. And if she dared say anything, if she implied you couldn’t buy the whole of Les Halles* for three francs, he got angry, he called her a good-for-nothing, a wastrel, a useless fool who was being ripped off by the stallholders, and he was always quick to threaten her with going elsewhere for his board and keep. Then after a month, some mornings he forgot to put the three francs on the chest of drawers. She timidly tried to remind him in a roundabout fashion. But there were such quarrels and he made her life such a misery on the slightest pretext that she chose not to rely on him any longer. Quite the opposite: when he had not left the three twenty-sou coins and realized she provided something to eat just the same, he was as happy as a sandboy, kissing Nana and flirting and waltzing round the room with a chair. And she was so happy that she came to wish for there not to be anything to find on the chest of drawers in spite of the trouble she had in making ends meet. One day she even gave him back his three francs, making up a story about having some money left over from the day before. As he had not given her any the day before, he hesitated for a second, fearing she might be trying to teach him a lesson. But she looked at him so

lovingly and kissed him in such an absolute surrender of her body and soul that he put the coins in his pocket with the small convulsive shiver of a miser who is getting back money he was afraid he had lost. From that day forward he did not worry, never asking her where the money was coming from, looking black when there were only potatoes, grinning delightedly when it was turkey or leg of lamb. Nevertheless he had no qualms about aiming a few slaps at Nana to keep his hand in, even when he was in a good mood.

Nana had then found the means to provide for everything. Some days the house was stuffed with food. Twice a week Bosc came and had indigestion. One evening as Madame Lerat was leaving, in a bad temper at the sight of a copious dinner cooking that she wouldn't be eating, she could not stop herself asking straight out who was paying for it. Taken by surprise Nana looked shamefaced and started to cry.

'Well, that's a fine state of affairs,' said her aunt who had twigged what was going on.

Nana had resigned herself to it, to have some peace at home. And besides it was La Tricon's fault, she had met her in the Rue Laval one day when Fontan had gone off furious because of some cod he had been served. So she had said yes to La Tricon who in fact was not doing too well herself. As Fontan never got back before six, she had her afternoon to do as she liked and brought back forty francs, sixty, sometimes more. If she'd been able to keep her old status she would have earned ten or fifteen louis but she was nonetheless quite content to have enough to put bread on the table. In the evening she forgot all her troubles when Bosc was bursting with food and Fontan, with his elbows on the table, allowed her to plant kisses on his eyelids with the superior air of a man who is loved for himself alone.

So Nana, still besotted with her darling boy, her sweet lamb, with a passion that was even more blind now that she was having to pay, fell back into the gutter, where she had begun. She put herself around, hoping for a hundred sous as in the old days when she was just a little streetwalker. One Sunday at La Rochefoucauld market she made peace with Satin after having flung herself at her, and in a loud voice reproached her for her association with Madame Robert. But Satin was content to answer that if you didn't like something, that was no reason to want to stop other people from doing it. And Nana, naturally broad-minded, accepted the philosophy that one never knows where one will end up, and forgave her. What's more, her

curiosity was pricked and she questioned her about the seamy places, astonished she could still learn more at her age, after all that she knew about it. And she laughed, exclaimed, finding it funny, though she was rather put off, for deep down she was conventional in her attitude to anything she was unaccustomed to in her own life. So she returned to Laure's place, eating there when Fontan dined in town. She enjoyed the stories, love affairs, and jealous intrigues that interested the customers, who never stopped talking for one moment to put down their forks. However, she wasn't one of them, as she said. Big-bosomed Laure with her affectionate motherliness often invited her to spend a few days in her villa in Asnières,* a country house where there were rooms for seven ladies. She refused, she was scared. But Satin swore that she would be all right, that there were gentlemen from Paris as well who would push you on the swing or play *tonneau** with you, so she promised to go later on when she could get away.

At that time she was very distressed and not inclined to fun and games. She had run out of money. When La Tricon did not need her—and that happened all too frequently—she did not know what to do with herself. At those times she went out with Satin on wild jaunts to the sleazy places along the muddy back streets under the flickering gaslights. She went back to the squalid taverns on the outskirts of Paris where she had first hit the dance floors as a young girl; she revisited the dark places of the outer boulevards, out by the old gates of the city where, when she was fifteen, men would kiss her while her father was hunting all over for her to tan her backside. They both dashed around, visiting all the dances and cafés of the *quartier*, climbing up stairs wet with spittle and spilt beer; or else they strolled along, going back up the street, and stationed themselves against the portes-cochères. Satin, who had begun her trade in the Quartier Latin, took Nana to Bullier's* and to the brasseries of the Boulevard Saint-Michel. But the holidays were about to start and they saw little chance of making any money so they always went back to the Grands Boulevards. They'd still be likely to have more luck there. So from the heights of Montmartre to the plateau of the Observatoire, they worked the whole city. Rainy evenings when their little boots fell apart, hot evenings when their bodices stuck to their skin, long shifts, endless traipsing up and down, rough handling and disputes, the last brutalities from a client taken off into some squalid lodging house and swearing as he came down the greasy stairs.

The summer was coming to an end, a stormy summer with sweltering nights. They went off together after dinner towards nine. On the pavements of the Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette two lines of women hurried busily past the shopfronts, never giving them a glance, their petticoats hitched up and their eyes on the ground. This was the hungry descent from the Quartier Bréda when the first gas lamps were lit. Nana and Satin went along by the church, always taking the Rue Le Peletier. Then, a hundred metres from the Café Riche, as they were reaching their field of operations, they let go the hem of their dresses which had been carefully lifted until that moment; and from then on, risking the dust sweeping along the pavements and wiggling their hips, they minced along the street, slowing down only when they crossed the harsh light beaming out from some big café. Strutting along, laughing loudly as they looked back at the men turning their heads, they were in their element. In the dark, their whitened faces with rouged lips and kohl-black eyelids had the troubling charm of a cheap Eastern bazaar that had spilled out into the open street. Until eleven, amongst the jostling crowds, they were in a jolly mood, calling out the occasional ‘Stupid oaf!’ after some clumsy man who had stepped on a skirt and torn the hem. They exchanged familiar greetings with the waiters and stopped for a chat by a table, accepting drinks which they sipped slowly, relieved to sit down and wait for people to come out of the theatre. But as the night went on, if they had not made one or two trips to the Rue La Rochefoucauld, they started flaunting themselves shamelessly as the pursuit grew ever more desperate. Under the trees, along the dusty boulevards that were now emptying, fierce bargaining with much swearing and violence was taking place, while respectable families, father, mother and daughters, used to seeing such encounters, were going quietly and calmly on their way. Then after working the Opéra to the Gymnase* a dozen times, and when finally the men had lost interest and were walking quickly off into the oncoming night, Nana and Satin kept to the pavements on the Rue du Faubourg-Montmartre.* There, until two in the morning, restaurants, brasseries and delicatessens blazed with light, a whole gaggle of women gathered at the doors of the cafés. They were the last lively places lit up in Paris at night, the last chance to strike a nocturnal bargain, quite blatantly, among the groups of people spreading out from one end of the street to the other, as though they were in the open corridor of a brothel. But on the evenings when they returned home with nothing to show for it, they quarrelled. Rue Notre-Dame-de-

Lorette stretched out before them black and deserted, shadowy women were still lingering; it was late going-home time in the *quartier*; poor girls, frustrated at not finding a single client all night, were still soliciting some wayward drunk or other as they kept him talking on the corner of the Rue Bréda or the Rue Fontaine.

They did, however, have some lucky breaks; twenty-franc coins collected from gentlemen who hid their decorations in their pockets as they went upstairs. Satin especially had a nose for them. On humid nights when Paris gave off a stale odour of unclean bedrooms, she knew that this soft weather, the disreputable places with their fetid atmosphere, drove men mad. And she watched out for the best-dressed of them, she could see it in their pale eyes. It was as if a madness of the flesh was passing through the city. Of course, she was a little afraid, for the most respectable-looking were the most depraved. The whole veneer cracked, the beast appeared, very demanding in his monstrous predilections, refined in his perversions. So Satin, little tart that she was, felt no respect; she was angered by the snobbish men in their carriages, asserting that their coachmen were nicer because they respected women and did not half kill them with their impossible desires. That high-class people could fall head first into the cesspit of vice like that was still a surprise to Nana who held on to prejudices about which Satin was busy disabusing her. So, she'd say, when she was having a serious chat, was there no morality any more? High or low class, was everyone then leading a life of debauchery? Well, so Paris from nine at night to three in the morning was a den of vice! And she chuckled, saying loudly that if you were a fly on the wall of all the bedrooms you would see some funny things going on, the lower classes copulating for all they were worth, and here and there quite a lot of notable people, more corrupt than the rest, with their noses in the muck. Her education was complete.

One evening as she went to pick up Satin, she recognized the Marquis de Chouard tottering downstairs, hanging on to the banisters, white-faced. He pretended to blow his nose. Then when she got upstairs she found Satin's room in a terrible state; she had not cleaned the place for a week, the bed was filthy and there were pots lying around. She was surprised that she knew the marquis. Oh yes, she certainly did! He had been a real pain when she and her pastry-cook boyfriend were together! Now he came back

occasionally. But he was getting on her nerves, he snuffled around in all the dirty corners and even sniffed her slippers.

‘Yes, darling, my slippers... filthy old man! He asks me to do all sorts...’

What worried Nana above all was the seriousness of this sordid debauchery. She remembered how when she was a rising star, she gladly took part in such activities, whereas now she saw around her girls who were getting more worn out every day. Besides, Satin put the fear of God in her about the police. She was full of stories about them. She used to sleep with someone from the vice squad just to have a bit of peace and quiet. He had twice intervened to let her off being registered.* And nowadays she was afraid of being arrested again as it was obvious she was a prostitute. Nana should listen to her advice. In order to get their bonuses, the police arrested as many women as possible. They detained everybody, they shut your mouth by hitting you if you screamed, they knew they’d be supported and rewarded even when they had arrested a respectable girl among the crowd of others. In the summer, twelve or fifteen of them made raids on the boulevard, rounding up as many as thirty women in one night by closing off part of the pavement. But Satin knew the places the police operated in, so as soon as she caught sight of them she would escape through the frightened women fleeing in all directions through the crowds. They were scared of the law, so terrified of the police headquarters that some of them remained rooted to the spot at the doors of the cafés as soon as the force swooped down on the avenue. But Satin was even more afraid of being informed on. Her pastry-cook had proved enough of a crook to threaten to turn her in when she left him. Yes, men lived off their mistresses with that trick, but so did countless wretched women who might shop you to the police if you were prettier than them. Nana listened to her, and grew more and more frightened. She had always been scared of the law, that unknown force, that male vengeance which could have her put away without anybody in the world to protect her. Saint-Lazare* seemed like a grave to her, a black hole where they cut off a woman’s hair and buried her alive. She might well tell herself that she had only to let Fontan go in order to find other men to protect her. Trying to reassure her, Satin said there were certain lists of women with their photographs that the police had to check before arresting any; but the fear persisted, as she always imagined being kicked and dragged around and made to go for an examination the next day. The

thought of the doctor’s couch filled her with apprehension and shame, even though she had countless times thrown caution to the winds.

So towards the end of September one night when she was strolling with Satin up the Boulevard Poissonnière, the latter suddenly broke into a run. And when she asked why, Satin hissed:

‘Police! Quick! Quick!’ And there was a mad stampede through the crowd. Skirts went swirling and were torn. There were blows and screams. One woman fell. The crowd watched, laughing at the brutal aggression of the police who rapidly closed in on them. Meanwhile Nana had lost sight of Satin. Rooted to the spot, she would certainly have been arrested if a man had not caught her up in his arms and taken her off in full view of the furious police. It was Prullière, who had just recognized her. Without a word he turned with her into the Rue Rougemont, deserted at that time, where she could get her breath, but she was so faint, he had to hold her up. She did not even thank him.

‘Come on now,’ he said finally. ‘Pull yourself together... Come up to my place.’

He lived nearby in the Rue Bergère. But she drew herself up immediately.

‘No, I don’t want to,’ she replied.

His reply was coarse:

‘You do it with everybody else. Why not me?’

‘Because.’

In her view that said it all.

She loved Fontan too much to betray him with a friend. The others did not count, if there was no pleasure in it and it was only because she had to. Faced with this stupid obstinacy the handsome Prullière, his self-esteem wounded, acted in a cowardly fashion.

‘Well, please yourself,’ he declared. ‘Only I am not going in your direction, my dear girl. Get out of this by yourself.’

And he abandoned her. She panicked again and made a huge detour to get back to Montmartre, slipping straight past the shops and going pale with fright every time a man drew near.

It was the next day that Nana, on her way to her aunt’s and still shaken by her terror of the day before, found herself face to face with Labordette at the end of a small lonely street in Batignolles. At first they both looked

embarrassed. Though always perfectly friendly, there were matters he did not care to make public. However, he was the first to recover his composure and exclaimed how glad he was to run into her. Everyone was still reeling from the way Nana had completely gone out of circulation; people were asking for her, old friends were pining for her. And, adopting a paternal attitude, he ended up delivering a lecture.

‘Frankly, my dear, between ourselves, it’s all becoming too stupid. We can understand you having a crush on someone but to get swindled and beaten up like that... Are you trying to win a prize for good behaviour or something?’

She heard him out in some embarrassment. However, when he spoke of Rose who was crowing about her conquest of Comte Muffat, her eyes glinted. She muttered:

‘Oh, if I felt like it...’

Anxious to oblige, he immediately proposed, as a friend, to act as go-between, but she declined his offer. Then he approached from a different angle. He told her that Bordenave was putting on a play by Fauchery in which there was a splendid role for her.

‘What! A play where there’s a part for me?’ she cried in astonishment. ‘So he knew about it and never told me!’

She did not mention Fontan’s name.

But she calmed down straight away. She would never go back to the theatre. No doubt Labordette wasn’t convinced, for he insisted, with a smile:

‘You know you can trust me. I sort out Muffat, you go back to the theatre, and I take him by the hand and bring him along to you.’

‘No!’ she replied with some spirit.

And she left him. Her heroic stance made her feel quite emotional. No wretched male would have made that sacrifice without trumpeting it from the rooftops. However, one thing struck her. Labordette had just given her exactly the same advice as Francis. In the evening when Fontan came home, she questioned him about Fauchery’s play. Two months ago he had made a comeback in the Variétés. Why had he not told her about the part?

‘What part?’ he said crossly. ‘Not the duchess, I assume? Ah, so you think you are a good actress! My dear girl, that role would kill you. You must be joking!’

She was dreadfully hurt. All evening he teased her, calling her Mademoiselle Mars.* The more he made fun of her, the more she held firm, taking a bitter-sweet pleasure in this heroic passion which made her in her own eyes most noble and loving. Ever since she had been going with other men in order to give Fontan enough to eat, and despite all the weariness and disgust she had put up with for his sake, she loved him more than ever. He was becoming her vice, she was prepared to pay for it, she was addicted and spurred on by his hitting her. He for his part ended up by treating her as if she were an animal. She was getting on his nerves, and he conceived such a fierce hatred of her that he no longer took into account his own interests. When Bosc made remarks to him, he flew into a rage without any reason, saying that he didn't give a damn about Nana or her cooking, that he would kick her out and give his seven thousand francs to some other woman. And that was how their relationship foundered.

One evening when Nana came home at about eleven, she found the door locked and bolted. She knocked once, no answer. A second time, still no answer. But she could see the light under the door and Fontan inside, who would not bother to walk over and open it. She knocked again several times calling his name, getting cross. Finally she heard Fontan's gruff drawl. All he said was:

'Shit!'

She hammered louder with her fists.

'Shit!'

She knocked louder still, enough to break the door down.

'Shit!'

And for a quarter of an hour she was assailed by the same jeering vulgarity, echoing mockingly after each blow she dealt the door. Then, seeing she wasn't going to give up, he opened it abruptly, planted himself in the doorway with arms folded and said in the same brutal, frosty voice:

'For God's sake, have you quite finished? What do you want? Will you let us sleep or not? You can see I've got company.'

And indeed he was not alone. Nana saw the faded blonde from the Bouffes, with unkempt hair and gimlet-hole eyes, already half undressed and giggling, surrounded by furniture which she, Nana, had paid for. But Fontan took a step forward and opened his great pincer-like fingers.

'Clear off, or I'll throttle you!'

Then Nana started sobbing convulsively. She was scared of him and made good her escape. This time she was the one being kicked out. The thought of Muffat came to her suddenly in her rage. But surely it was not Fontan who should have been doing the same thing to her.

On the pavement her first thought was to go and sleep at Satin's if she didn't have anyone staying. She met her outside her house. The latter had also been thrown out by her landlord who had just put a chain on the door —illegally, since the furniture belonged to her. She swore, she talked of dragging him off to the police. Meanwhile, as midnight struck, they had to think about finding a bed. And Satin, reflecting that it wouldn't be a good idea to involve the law in her affairs, ended up taking Nana to the Rue Laval to a lady who owned a small lodging house. They were given a narrow room on the first floor with a window looking out on to the courtyard. Satin said:

'I wouldn't have minded going to Madame Robert's. There's always somewhere I can sleep there. But if you were there, it would be impossible. She's madly jealous. The other evening she beat me up.'

When they had shut the door of their room, Nana, who was still upset, collapsed into tears and told Satin dozens of times about Fontan's vicious treatment. Satin listened sympathetically, consoled her and, growing even more incensed than Nana, railed against men.

'Oh, the swine, what swine! We can't be doing with any more swine like that.'

Then she helped Nana to get undressed. She fussed around her endearingly like a submissive little woman. She said again in a coaxing voice:

'Let's go to bed straight away, darling. We shall be more comfortable then. Oh, you are such a silly girl to get angry! They are bastards, I tell you. Don't think about them any more. I love you. Stop crying, just to please your little friend.'

And in bed she took Nana straight away into her arms, to calm her down. She didn't want to hear another word about Fontan. Every time his name recurred on the lips of her friend, she stopped it with a kiss, with a little angry pout, beautifully childlike with her hair loose, and overwhelmed with tenderness. Then, little by little, in this sweet embrace Nana wiped her tears away. She was moved. She returned Satin's kisses. When two o'clock

struck the candle was still burning. They were stifling their laughter and uttering words of love to each other.

But suddenly Satin started up, half awake, listening. There was a noise inside the lodging house getting louder and louder.

‘The police!’ she said, going pale. ‘Oh my God, poor us, we’re done for!’

She had told scores of stories about the swoops the police made on lodging houses. And yet that night, as they took refuge in the Rue Laval, neither suspected anything would happen. But at the word ‘police’ Nana took leave of her senses. She jumped out of bed, ran across the room, opened the window, completely distraught, like a madwoman about to leap. But fortunately the little courtyard had a glass roof and wire netting over it, level with the window. So she didn’t hesitate, she climbed over the sill and disappeared into the night, her slip floating up and her backside bare.

Satin was terrified. ‘Stay there,’ she said again and again. ‘You’ll kill yourself.’

Then, as someone was hammering on the door, she acted like a good friend, throwing her friend’s clothes into the back of the wardrobe. She had already resigned herself, thinking that after all, if they registered her, she wouldn’t always have to be so stupidly scared. She pretended to be overcome with sleep, she yawned, argued, ended up opening the door to a tall young man with a dirty beard who said:

‘Show me your hands. No needle marks, I see, you can’t be working. Come along now, get dressed!’

‘But I’m not a seamstress, I’m a polisher,’ protested Satin saucily.

She got dressed obediently, however, knowing there was no point arguing. Shouts could be heard in the hotel, a girl was clinging on to the door and refusing to go with them. Another woman who was in bed with her lover, a fact confirmed by him, pretended to be respectable and outraged at this treatment; she threatened to bring an action against the chief of police. For almost an hour there was a noise of heavy boots on the stairs, doors rattled by fists, shrill protests stifled with sobs, skirts brushing against walls, the rude awakening of a horde of women brutally carted off by three policemen, led by a slight, impeccably polite commissaire with fair hair. Then the house fell into complete silence once more.

Nobody had sold her down the line, Nana was saved. She groped her way back into the room, shivering, terrified. Her bare feet were bleeding, torn by the wire. For a long time she sat on the bed, still listening. Towards morning, however, she fell asleep. But at eight when she woke, she made her escape from the lodging house and ran to her aunt's. When Madame Lerat, who was at that moment having her coffee with Zoë, saw her at that time of day, crestfallen and bedraggled, she straight away guessed what had happened.

'Right, so it's over!' she cried. 'I told you he would flay you alive. Come on in, you know you're always welcome here.'

Zoë had risen, muttering with respectful familiarity:

'So Madame has come back to us at last. I've been expecting her.'

But Madame Lerat wanted Nana to kiss Louiset immediately because, she said, now his mother was back, he would be happy. Louiset was still asleep, pale and sickly-looking. And when Nana leaned over his white pimply face, all her troubles of the past months caught at her throat and choked her.

'Oh, my baby, my poor little boy!' she stammered in one last fit of sobbing.

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CHAPTER 9

AT the Variétés they were rehearsing *La Petite Duchesse*. They had just finished with Act One and were about to begin on Act Two. At the front of the stage in a couple of old armchairs Fauchery and Bordenave were having a discussion, while the prompt, old Cossard, a little hunchback of a man, sat on a chair with a rush seat, leafing through the script, a pencil between his lips.

'Well, what are we waiting for?' Bordenave snapped, thumping the floor angrily with the end of his large walking stick. 'Barillot, what's the delay?'

'It's Monsieur Bosc, he's vanished,' answered Barillot whose function was assistant stage manager.

Then a storm erupted. Everyone shouted for Bosc. Bordenave was swearing.

'For God's sake, not again! No matter how many times you ring, they're always somewhere they shouldn't be. And then they moan when you keep them after four o'clock.'

Bosc arrived totally unperturbed.

'Eh, what's the matter? What am I wanted for? Oh, it's my cue, is it? Why didn't someone tell me? All right. Simonne says her bit: "Here are the guests arriving", and I enter. Which entrance do I use?'

'The door of course!' Fauchery declared, annoyed.

'Yes, but where's the door?'

This time Bordenave's ire was directed at Barillot; he started swearing again and banging the stage repeatedly with his stick.

'For God's sake, I told them to put a chair there to show everyone where the door was. Do we have to set it up all over again each time? Barillot? Where's Barillot? He's another! Never there when he's needed.'

But it was Barillot himself who silently moved forward to put the chair in place, letting the torrent of abuse wash over him. And the rehearsal began. Simonne, with her hat on and covered with her fur wrap, started to act the part of a servant putting the furniture in its place. She broke off to complain:

‘I’m cold, by the way, so I’m keeping my hands up my sleeves.’

Then, her voice altering, she welcomed Bosc with a little cry:

‘Ah, here comes Monsieur le Comte! You are the first, Monsieur le Comte, Madame will be so pleased.’

Bosc was wearing muddy trousers, a big yellow overcoat, and a huge muffler wrapped around his throat. His hands in his pockets, an old cap on his head, he shuffled across the stage making no attempt to act and said in a dull, expressionless voice:

‘Don’t disturb your mistress, Isabelle. I want it to be a surprise.’

The rehearsal continued. Bordenave, scowling, slumped back in his chair, listened, with a weary expression. Fauchery, on edge, could not stop fidgeting around on his seat, itching to interrupt every minute, but he managed to keep quiet. But behind him in the dark, empty theatre he heard whispering.

‘Is she there?’ he asked, leaning towards Bordenave.

The latter nodded. Before taking on the role of Géraldine that he was offering her, Nana had wanted to see the play for she was not sure she wanted to play a cocotte again. She was hoping for a part as a respectable woman. She was concealed in a dark stage box with Labordette, who was negotiating with Bordenave on her behalf. Fauchery glanced around briefly and then went back to watching the rehearsal.

Only the apron was lit. A small support, with one gaslight connected by a lead to the footlights, and behind it the reflector, threw all the light over the front of the stage, but cast a sinister glow through the semi-darkness, like a huge yellow eye. Cossard lifted the script to see more clearly against the thin stem of the support that threw into sharp relief the hump on his back. Bordenave and Fauchery were already in darkness. In the middle of the enormous auditorium the light from the little lamp, spreading out only a yard or two, looked like a station lantern hanging from a pole, it transformed the actors into weird visions with their shadows dancing behind them. The rest of the stage was filled with a dusty haze, like a building site, or like a ship, gutted and filled with a clutter of ladders, frames, and stage sets whose faded paint made them look like so many piles of debris; and the backcloths, suspended in the air, resembled rags hanging from the beams of some vast warehouse full of clothes. Up above, a ray of

pure sunlight through a window cut across the rigging-loft with a shaft of gold.

Meanwhile, at the back of the stage, actors chatted as they waited for their cues. Gradually their voices had got louder.

‘Oh, be quiet, you lot!’ roared Bordenave, jumping up from his seat in a fury. ‘I can’t hear a word!... Go! Go out if you want to talk. The rest of us are working. Barillot, if they carry on yapping, I’ll fine the lot of ’em!’

They were quiet for a moment. They formed a small group sitting on a bench and some rustic chairs in a corner of the garden, the evening’s first stage set which was there ready to be installed. Fontan and Prullière were listening to Rose Mignon, to whom the director of the Folies-Dramatiques* had just made some very enticing offers. But a voice cried:

‘The duchess! Saint-Firmin! Your cue, duchess and Saint-Firmin!’

It was only at the second call that Prullière remembered he was Saint-Firmin. Rose, who was playing Duchesse Hélène, was already waiting for him for their entrance. Slowly, dragging his feet across the bare, noisy boards, old Bosc was going back to his seat. Then Clarisse offered him half the bench.

‘What’s the matter with him bawling like that?’ She meant Bordenave. ‘We shall have fun before long. You can’t put on any play these days without him throwing a tantrum.’

Bosc shrugged. He was above all this nonsense. Fontan muttered:

‘He suspects it’ll be a flop. I think this play is daft.’

Then, addressing Clarisse and coming back to the subject of Rose:

‘Do you trust these offers from the Folies? Three hundred francs an evening for a hundred performances. Why not a house in the country thrown in! If you gave his wife three hundred, Mignon would drop Bordenave like a hot brick!’

Clarisse believed it about the three hundred francs. That Fontan, he was always running down colleagues behind their backs. But Simonne interrupted. She was shivering. All of them, buttoned up and with scarves fastened round their necks, looked at the ray of sun which was shining in at the top without reaching as far as the bleak stage. Outside, under a clear November sky, it was freezing.

‘And there’s no heating in the foyer!’ cried Simonne again. ‘It’s disgusting, he’s a penny-pinching old so-and-so! I feel like leaving, I don’t

want to catch my death.’

‘Be quiet!’ bawled Bordenave again in a voice like thunder.

Then for a few minutes all you could hear was the murmur of actors speaking their lines. They hardly bothered to indicate the accompanying gestures. Their voices remained uninflected so that they wouldn’t tire themselves. However, when they wanted to make a point, they shot a glance at the auditorium. In front of them was a gaping hole of vague shapes like a high and windowless loft containing a fine dust. The theatre without its lighting, or with only the dim light from the stage, was asleep and looked sad and abandoned and rather sinister in the darkness. The dense black night engulfed the paintings on the ceiling. From top to bottom of the front boxes, right and left, huge grey serge covers hung, to protect the curtains; and there were further lengths of serge thrown over the velvet-covered rails, enclosing the galleries in a double shroud of a pale hue, staining the shadows. In this general discoloration all you could make out were the darker hollows of the boxes which defined the outline of the various levels, with their plush seats of red velvet which looked almost black. The chandelier had been completely lowered and filled the orchestra seats with its crystal pendants; it was as if the spectators had left on a journey from which they would never return.

And in fact Rose, in her role as the little duchess who had wandered into the house of a prostitute, advanced towards the front of the stage at that moment. She held out her hands and pouted winsomely at the empty, dark theatre which was sad as a house in mourning.

‘My goodness, what strange people!’ she said, with emphasis, certain of creating an effect.

From the back of the ground-floor box where she was hiding, Nana, enveloped in a large shawl, was listening to the play and watching Rose intently. She turned to Labordette and asked him under her breath:

‘Are you sure he’s coming?’

‘Positive. No doubt he will arrive with Mignon, so as to have a pretext. As soon as he appears, you go up to Mathilde’s dressing room and I’ll bring him along.’

They were talking about Comte Muffat. It was an interview arranged by Labordette on neutral territory. He had had a serious conversation with Bordenave whose financial situation was suffering from two failures in

succession; so Bordenave had been only too anxious to offer Nana a part in his play, wanting to curry favour with the count in the hope of a loan.

‘And this role of Géraldine, what do you think of it?’ Labordette asked.

Nana sat still and said nothing. After a first act, in which the playwright pictured the Duc de Beaurivage being unfaithful to his wife with the blonde Géraldine, a comic opera star, in Act Two you saw Duchesse Hélène going to the actress’s house one night when there was a masked ball to learn by what magic power the ladies conquered and kept their husbands. It was a cousin of hers, the handsome Oscar de Saint-Firmin, who took her along, hoping to seduce her himself. And in the first lesson, to her great surprise she hears Géraldine coarsely abusing the duke, who accepts it all and appears delighted. This draws from her the cry: ‘Oh, I see! So that’s how you should talk to men!’ This was pretty well the only scene in the act in which Géraldine appeared. As for the duchess, it isn’t long before she is punished for her curiosity: an elderly beau, the Baron de Tardiveau, takes her for a cocotte and becomes very fervent, while on the other side of the stage on a chaise longue Beaurivage makes his peace with Géraldine by giving her a kiss. As the role of the latter was not yet allocated, old Cossard got up to read the part and despite himself he acted it out, ending up in the arms of Bosc. They were still on this scene with the rehearsal limping along in gloomy style when Fauchery suddenly leapt out of his seat. He had contained himself till now but suddenly his nerves got the better of him.

‘Not like that!’ he yelled.

The actors stopped, arms by their sides. Fontan’s nose tilted and he assumed his look of total disdain:

‘What, not like what?’

‘Nobody’s got it, not at all, not at all!’ Fauchery said, gesturing, striding over the stage, and beginning to mime the scene. ‘Look, Fontan, you have to understand why Tardiveau is so excited. You have to lean over like this and grab hold of the duchess. And you, Rose, it’s then you turn your head, swiftly, like this. But not too quickly, only when you hear them kissing...’

He broke off. In his eagerness to explain he shouted to Cossard:

‘Géraldine, give him a kiss, a smacking kiss so it can be heard!’

Old Cossard turned to Bosc and smacked his lips loudly:

‘That’s right! That kind of kiss,’ Fauchery said, triumphantly. ‘Do the kiss again... Do you see, Rose, that’s given me time to go across and utter a

little cry: “Oh, she’s kissed him!” But for that to happen, Tardiveau has to go upstage again. Do you hear, Fontan, you go upstage again. Let’s try that, altogether.’

The actors went through the scene again. But Fontan did it with such bad grace that it did not work at all. Twice Fauchery had to reiterate his stage directions, each time miming more energetically. Everyone listened gloomily, looking at one another as if they had been asked to walk with their heads between their legs, then they made a stab at it, but stopped immediately, stiff as puppets whose strings have just snapped.

‘No, I don’t understand, it’s beyond me.’ Fontan said finally in an insolent tone.

Bordenave’s lips were tightly pursed. Slumped in the back of his seat, only the top of his hat pulled down over his eyes was visible in the sinister light of the small gas lamp, while his abandoned cane lay across his lap. You would have said he was asleep. Suddenly he started.

‘It’s stupid, dear boy,’ he declared calmly to Fauchery.

‘What do you mean stupid?’ the author cried, turning pale. ‘Stupid yourself, my dear fellow!’

At this Bordenave began to get cross. He repeated the word stupid, tried to find something stronger, found the words ‘fool’ and ‘cretin’. The audience would start jeering and they would not get to the end of the act. And as Fauchery, exasperated, without being unduly put out by this trading of insults which occurred between them every time they put on a new play, called him straight out an ignorant pig, Bordenave completely lost his temper. He waved his stick about wildly and cried, puffing and panting like a bull:

‘For God’s sake, shut your mouth! We’ve lost a quarter of an hour on this idiotic nonsense... Yes, idiotic. There’s no rhyme nor reason in it. And yet it’s easy as pie! You, Fontan, you don’t move. You, Rose, you move a little, see, not more than this and then go downstage... Come on, walk across properly this time. And Cossard, give her a kiss.’

Then there was a big muddle. The scene still didn’t go any better. It was Bordenave’s turn to mime, with elephantine grace, to the contemptuous amusement of Fauchery, who shrugged his shoulders in pity. Then Fontan tried to voice his opinion. Even Bosc allowed himself to make some suggestions. Exhausted, Rose had ended up sitting on the chair which

indicated where the door was supposed to be. They no longer knew where they were in the play. To cap it all, in the midst of all this chaos, Simonne thought she heard her cue, and came in too early, which so enraged Bordenave that, brandishing his cane in all directions, he landed her a whack on the backside. He often hit women in rehearsals when he had slept with them. She made herself scarce, as he shouted furiously after her:

‘Well, that’ll teach you, and I swear to God I’ll shut the whole place down if people go on annoying me.’

Fauchery had just jammed his cap on his head, pretending to be leaving. But he stayed at the back of the stage and returned when he saw Bordenave on his chair again, sweating with rage. He himself went and sat next to him. They remained a moment one beside the other, not moving, while a hushed silence fell upon the dark auditorium. The actors waited almost two minutes. They all looked exhausted, as if they were recovering from some terrible labour.

‘Well, let’s get on,’ Bordenave said finally in his normal voice, completely calm now.

‘Yes, let’s get on,’ echoed Fauchery. ‘We’ll sort out the scene tomorrow.’

And they stretched out in their armchairs while the rehearsal continued in a bored, listless fashion. During the disagreement between director and writer, Fontan and the others had been relaxing on the bench and the garden seats at the back. They were sniggering, they were complaining, they had a few harsh words to say. But when Simonne came back, telling them with a tearful voice about him hitting her on her backside, their indignation grew and they vowed that in her place they would have strangled the bastard. She wiped her eyes, nodding in agreement. It was over, she would leave, especially since Steiner, the day before, had offered to launch her career. Clarisse was most surprised, the banker was broke; but Prullière began to laugh and reminded them of the trick played by this damned Jew when he was carrying on openly with Rose and floating his Salines des Landes enterprise on the Bourse. And now he was talking about a new project, a tunnel under the Bosphorus. Simonne listened attentively. As for Clarisse, she had been angry for the last week, because wasn’t that beast of a La Faloise, whom she had got rid of by pushing him into Gaga’s venerable arms, now about to inherit from a very rich uncle? It was just her luck, she was always setting things up for someone else. Then that swine of a Bordenave had given her a duff role again, fifty lines, as though she

couldn’t have taken the part of Géraldine! She dreamed about that role, she fervently hoped Nana would refuse it.

‘Well, what about me?’ said Prullière, very glum. ‘I haven’t even got two hundred lines. I want to give up the part. It’s degrading to make me play that spineless creature, Saint-Firmin. And what dreadful style, my dears! It’s going to be a terrible flop, you know.’

But Simonne, who was chatting to old Barillot, came back saying breathlessly:

‘Talking of Nana, she’s here in the theatre.’

‘Where?’ asked Clarisse, quickly getting up to look.

Word went round straight away. Everyone was leaning over, agog. The rehearsal was put on hold for a minute or two. But Bordenave started out of his trance, shouting:

‘Well, what’s going on? Finish the act... And be quiet over there, we can’t hear a thing!’

In her box Nana was still following the play. Twice Labordette had wanted to chat to her, but she had been impatient with him, digging him with her elbow to make him be quiet. They were just getting to the end of the second act when two figures appeared at the back of the theatre. As they were coming down on tiptoe, avoiding making a noise, Nana recognized Mignon and Comte Muffat who came over silently to shake hands with Bordenave.

‘Oh, there they are,’ she muttered with a sigh of relief.

Rose Mignon did her last speech. Then Bordenave said they had to begin that second act again before starting the third. And, turning from the rehearsal, he welcomed the count with an air of exaggerated politeness, while Fauchery pretended to be engrossed in the actors grouped around him. Mignon was whistling, with his hands behind his back and his eyes fixed on his wife, who seemed nervous.

‘Well, shall we go up?’ Labordette asked Nana. ‘I’ll get you settled in the dressing room and come back for him.’

Nana left the box immediately. She had to grope her way along the passage outside the stalls. But Bordenave guessed she was there as she passed through the dark theatre and caught up with her at the end of the corridor which went around behind the stage, a narrow tunnel where the

gaslights burned night and day. There, in order to proceed quickly with the whole business, he tried to enthuse her about the part of the cocotte.

‘Hey, what a role, eh? What a bitch! It’s just made for you. Come and rehearse tomorrow.’

Nana was unimpressed. She wanted to know what happened in Act Three.

‘Oh, Act Three is terrific! The duchess starts to behave like a cocotte in her own house, and that disgusts Beaurivage and he becomes a reformed character. And there is a quid pro quo that’s very funny, Tardiveau arrives and thinks he is in a dancer’s house...’

‘And what about Géraldine in all this?’ Nana interrupted him.

‘Géraldine?’ queried Bordenave, a little embarrassed. ‘She has one scene, not a long one but it’s very well written. I tell you it’s just made for you, are you going to sign the contract?’

She gave him a long stare. Finally she answered:

‘Soon, we’ll see.’

And she rejoined Labordette who was waiting for her on the stairs. Everyone in the theatre had recognized her. There was some whispering. Prullière was scandalized by her coming back and Clarisse was very worried about her part. As for Fontan, he was feigning a cold indifference; it wasn’t for him to speak ill of a woman he had once loved. Basically, after his old passion had turned to hate, he was still angry and bitter about her loyalty, her beauty, and their life as a couple which he had rejected on account of her perverted, monstrous inclinations.

Meanwhile, when Labordette reappeared and approached the count, Rose Mignon, alerted by the presence of Nana, suddenly understood what was going on. Muffat bored her to tears, but the idea of being dumped like that maddened her. Usually reticent on that subject with her husband, she said coarsely:

‘D’you see what’s going on? I swear that if she starts going with Steiner again I’ll scratch her eyes out!’

Mignon, resigned and above all this, shrugged like a man who has seen it all.

‘Hush, will you?’ he muttered. ‘Do me the favour of keeping your mouth shut!’

He knew where his interests lay. He had drained Muffat dry, he realized that Nana had only to give the count a sign and he would let her walk all over him. You can't fight passions like that. So, knowing what men were like, his only concern now was to get out of the situation as best he could. They would see. He would bide his time.

'Rose, onstage!' Bordenave shouted. 'We'll restart Act Two!'

'Go on, onstage!' Mignon echoed. 'Trust me.'

Then, still mocking Fauchery, he thought it amusing to compliment him on his play. A very fine play it was. Only why was his aristocratic woman so respectable? It wasn't true to life. And, chuckling, he asked who had been the inspiration for the Duc de Beaurivage, Géraldine's spineless lover. Fauchery just grinned, not in the least upset. But Bordenave, glancing at Muffat, seemed rather cross, and so Mignon toned down his remarks.

'For God's sake, let's get on with it,' bellowed the director. 'Come on, Barillot! Hey, where's Bosc? Is he fooling around again?'

But Bosc was getting there, taking his time. The rehearsal resumed at the moment when Labordette was ushering in the count, who was quaking at the thought of seeing Nana again. After their rupture he had felt a terrible emptiness; not knowing what to do with himself, he had agreed to be handed on to Rose, feeling he was suffering from the disruption to his routine. Besides, in his mental turmoil, he was trying to forget everything, forbidding himself to go searching for Nana, and avoiding a showdown with the countess. It had seemed to him that was the only dignified thing to do. But changes were secretly taking place in him, and Nana was slowly taking possession of him through memories, through the weakness of his flesh, through these new feelings that were proprietorial, affectionate, almost paternal. The memory of that abominable scene was fading. He no longer saw Fontan, no longer heard Nana's words when she threw him out, dealing him a slap in the face when she told him of his wife's adultery. All of that was just water under the bridge; but in his heart there was a worrying tightness and the pain worsened constantly until it almost suffocated him. He began to have silly thoughts, he himself was to blame, he imagined she would not have betrayed him if he had truly loved her. His anguish became more than he could bear, he was dreadfully unhappy. It was like the nagging ache of an old wound, not that blind, immediate desire of before, when he was willing to put up with anything, but a jealous passion for this woman, an obsessive need for her alone, for her hair, for her mouth, for her body.

When he remembered the sound of her voice, a shudder went through his limbs. He desired her with a miser's compulsion and with an infinite tenderness. And that love so painfully filled his soul that at the first words of Labordette, offering to engineer a rendezvous, he had not been able to help throwing himself into his arms, though afterwards he was ashamed of such foolish abandon in a man of his standing. But Labordette understood him. He gave further proof of his tact when he left the count by the staircase with these simple words, softly spoken:

'Second floor, right-hand corridor, the door isn't locked.'

Muffat was on his own in this quiet part of the theatre. As he passed outside the green room, he saw through the open doors the dilapidated condition of the huge space, its filth and shabbiness obvious now in the full light of day. But what struck him most as he emerged from the darkness and tumult of the stage was the brightness and the absolute silence on the stairs which he had seen one night, full of gas fumes, and noisy women clattering down from the upper floors. You could feel the boxes were unoccupied, the corridors empty; not a soul, not one sound; while through the square windows on a level with the stairs, the pale November sun came in, throwing patches of yellow dancing particles into the deathly quiet which descended from above. He was glad it was calm and silent, he went up slowly, trying to get his breath. His heart was thumping, he grew fearful of behaving childishly, with sighs and tears. Then on the first-floor landing he leaned against the wall, sure nobody would notice him there. And holding his handkerchief to his mouth, he saw the uneven steps, the iron balustrade polished by many hands, the flaking distemper, the squalor of this house of ill repute on display to the world at that pale hour in the afternoon when the girls slept. But as he reached the second floor, he had to step over a ginger cat curled up on one of the steps. Its eyes half closed, this cat was the only one guarding the house, dozing in the stuffy stale smells left by the girls from the night before.

In the corridor on the right-hand side, the door to the box was indeed only pulled to. Nana was waiting. The young actress, Mathilde, a little scrap of a thing, kept her dressing room in a disgusting state with chipped jars all over the place, a greasy washstand, a chair with red marks on it as if someone had bled on to the straw. The paper stuck on the walls and ceiling was spattered up to the top with drops of soapy water. It smelled so badly of stale lavender water that Nana opened the window. And she remained there

a moment with her elbows on the sill, breathing hard, leaning out to watch Madame Bron down below, whose broom made a constant sweeping noise on the greenish slates in the narrow courtyard, now sunk in shadow. A canary in a cage hung from a shutter was chirping out its shrill song. You couldn't hear the traffic from the boulevard or the neighbouring streets, it was as quiet as a square in a small provincial town, asleep in the sunshine. When she looked up, she could see the small buildings and glittering glass fronts of the galleries in the Passage, then, beyond them, in the Rue Vivienne, the backs of the tall houses, silent and seeming empty. There were terraces on various levels, a photographer had placed a large blue glass cage on a roof. It was very gay. Nana, absorbed in it all, suddenly thought she heard a knock. She turned round and cried:

'Come in!'

On seeing the count, she shut the window. It wasn't at all warm and there was no need for the inquisitive Madame Bron to hear their conversation. They looked at each other gravely. Then, as he remained very stiff and tongue-tied, she began to giggle and said:

'So here you are again, silly bones!'

He was so overcome with emotion that he looked as if he were turned to stone. He called her Madame, he considered himself fortunate to see her again. Then, to hurry proceedings along, she became still more familiar.

'Don't stand on ceremony. You wanted to see me, didn't you? So I suppose that wasn't so we'll stand here staring at each other like two china dogs. We both acted badly, but for my part, I forgive you.'

And it was agreed they would speak of it no more. He nodded. He calmed down, couldn't think of what to say in the tumult of words flooding to his lips. Surprised by his reserve, she played her big card.

'Come on now, you are a sensible man,' she resumed, with a thin smile. 'Now that we have made our peace with each other, let's shake hands and be friends.'

'Friends?' he murmured, suddenly anxious.

'Yes, it might sound silly but I want you to respect me. Now that we've had it out between us, at least if we meet we won't behave like two prize idiots.'

He made as though to interrupt her.

‘Let me finish. No man could ever say I treated him badly, do you understand? Well, I was upset to think you were the first. We all have our sense of honour, my dear.’

‘But it’s not like that!’ he cried loudly. ‘Sit down and listen to me.’

And as if he was afraid she might leave, he pushed her on to the only chair in the room. He paced around, his agitation increasing. The little dressing room, enclosed and full of sunshine, was damp but warm and cosy nevertheless, its peace untroubled by any noise from outside. In the moments of silence you could hear nothing but the high trills of the canary like the sound of a distant flute.

‘Listen,’ he said, planting himself in front of her, ‘I’ve come to get you back. Yes, I want to start again. You know that, so why are you speaking to me like this? Answer me. Do you say yes?’

She bent her head and with her nail picked at the red bloodied straw beneath her. And seeing that he was anxious, she took her time. Finally she lifted her face which had assumed a serious expression, her beautiful eyes which she had contrived to infuse with melancholy.

‘Oh no, it’s impossible, darling. I can never come back to you.’

‘But why?’ he stammered, while an expression of unspeakable suffering passed across his face.

‘Why? For heaven’s sake! Because it’s impossible, that’s all. I don’t want to.’

He gazed ardently at her for several seconds more. Then his legs gave way and he fell to his knees on the tiled floor. But all she said, in a bored voice, was:

‘Oh, don’t act like a baby!’

But he was already acting like one. He had fallen at her feet, put his arms around her waist and was squeezing her tight, his face between her knees and his flesh pressing against them. When he felt her like that, her velvety limbs again, beneath the thin stuff of her dress, he was shaken by a convulsion. And the fever made him shiver, he was lost, bruising himself ever more against her legs, as if he wanted to enter her. The old chair was creaking. Sobs of desire were suffocating him under the low ceiling, in the air made acrid by old perfumes.

‘Well, what do you want?’ said Nana, letting him have his way. ‘This isn’t going to get you anywhere, since it’s just not possible. My goodness,

what a baby you are!’

He quietened down. But he remained on the floor, not letting her go, saying in a strangled voice:

‘At least listen to what I was coming to offer you. I’ve seen a town house near the Parc Monceau.* I will give you anything you wish for. To have you for myself I would give you my fortune... Yes, that would be the only condition: without sharing you with anybody, do you understand? And if you agreed to be mine and only mine, I would want you to be the most beautiful, the richest, carriages, diamonds, fine clothes...’

At each offer Nana shook her head proudly. Then, as he went on talking of giving her money because he didn’t know what else to tempt her with, she seemed to lose patience.

‘For goodness’ sake, have you finished pawing me? I’m a good-natured sort of girl, I don’t mind you doing that for a bit because you’re in such a bad way. But enough is enough, don’t you think? Let me get up. You’re wearing me out.’

She extricated herself from his arms and when she was on her feet:

‘No, no, no! I don’t want to.’

So he got up, with difficulty, and suddenly weak, he collapsed on to the chair, leaning back, his face in his hands. It was Nana’s turn to pace around. For a moment what she saw was the dirty wallpaper, the greasy washbasin, this filthy hole bathed in the pale sunlight. Then, stopping squarely in front of the count, she came to the point.

‘It’s a funny thing, but rich men imagine they can buy anything they want. Well, what if I don’t want it? I couldn’t care a toss about your presents. If you gave me the whole of Paris, it would still be no, always no. As you can see, it’s not the most salubrious of places here. Well, I wouldn’t care about that if I wanted to live here with you, while I would get bored to death in your palaces if I didn’t want to be there! Oh, money, my pet, you know where you can put your money! You can keep your damned money! That’s what I think of it!’

And she made a disgusted face. Then she became sentimental again and added in a mournful voice:

‘There, I know something which is worth more than money. Oh, if I had what I really want...’

He lifted his head slowly, and there was just a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

‘Oh, you can’t give it to me,’ she went on. ‘It’s not yours to give, and that’s the reason I can talk to you about it. Well, since we are having our little chat... I’d like the role of the respectable woman in their play.’

‘What respectable woman?’ he murmured, astonished.

‘Duchesse Hélène of course! If they think I’m going to play Géraldine, they’d better think again! A pathetic role, one scene, not even that. In any case it’s not the point. I’ve had enough of cocottes! Always cocottes, you would really think I only have it in me to play cocottes. Well, now I am really sick of it, because it’s obvious they think I am common and I can tell you, darling, they are very much mistaken! When I want to be high-class I can act very distinguished! Just look at me!’

And returning to the window, she came strutting back puffing out her chest, like a wary mother hen who doesn’t want to get her claws dirty. He watched her with his eyes still full of tears, rather taken aback by the advent of this unexpected comic sketch in the midst of his suffering. She walked around a moment, to show off her full range, with little smiles, eyelids fluttering, skirts swaying, and then standing again in front of him:

‘Eh? What do you think?’

‘Oh yes, perfect,’ he stammered, still tongue-tied and looking anxious.

‘I have the respectable woman off to a T, I tell you! I’ve tried at home and nobody can match my imitation of a duchess who doesn’t care a toss about men. Did you notice that when I walked past, I was looking down at you like *this*? Well, you’ve either got it or you haven’t. And anyway, I want to play the part of a respectable woman. I dream about it, I shall be unhappy if I don’t get it, I have to have that role—do you understand?’

She had grown serious. Her voice had an edge to it, she was very unhappy, really suffering because of her silly yearning. Still reeling from her rejection of him, Muffat waited, uncomprehending. There was a silence. Not a fly buzzed to disturb the peace in the empty building.

‘I tell you what,’ she said, frankly, ‘you must get me the part.’

He was flabbergasted. Then, with a despairing gesture:

‘But that’s impossible! You said yourself it wasn’t up to me.’

She cut him short with a shrug.

‘Go downstairs and tell Bordenave you want that part... Don’t be so naïve! Bordenave needs the money. Well, you can lend him some since you have money to burn.’

But as he was still reluctant, she got cross.

‘All right, I understand. You are afraid of upsetting Rose. I didn’t mention her when you were on the floor weeping, but I could have gone on about the pair of you... Yes, when you’ve sworn to a woman that you will love her for ever, you don’t take up with the first one to come along the very next day. Oh, I still resent that, I remember it all! Anyway, my dear, Mignon’s leftovers are not exactly appetizing! Before crawling to me in that stupid fashion, you should have parted company with that lousy bunch.’

He protested but in the end managed to stutter:

‘Well, I don’t give a damn about Rose. I’ll drop her at once.’

Nana seemed satisfied on this point. She went on:

‘So what’s stopping you? Bordenave’s in charge. Or are you going to say there’s Fauchery to deal with as well as Bordenave?’

Her words were more deliberate now. She was getting to the delicate crux of the matter. Muffat said nothing, his eyes cast down. He had deliberately remained ignorant of Fauchery’s attentions to the countess, comforting himself with the hope he might have been mistaken during that awful night spent in a doorway in the Rue Taitbout. But he still felt a revulsion for the man, a suppressed anger.

‘Well, Fauchery isn’t such a monster as all that!’ Nana suggested, attempting to establish what the relations were between the husband and the lover. ‘We can get round Fauchery. He’s not such a bad chap. You could say to him that it’s for me?’

The count did not want to entertain such a disgusting arrangement.

‘No, no, never!’ he cried. She waited. The phrase ‘Fauchery can’t refuse you anything’ almost slipped out but she realized that, as arguments went, that would be a bit harsh. She just smiled at him in a funny way and that smile spoke volumes. Muffat raised his eyes and looked at her, then lowered them again, pale and embarrassed.

‘Oh, you’re not being very nice to me,’ she murmured finally.

‘I can’t!’ he said, anguished. ‘Anything you want but not that, my love, oh I beg you, not that!’

Then she didn’t waste time arguing with him. With her little hands she pushed his head back and pressed her mouth upon his in a long kiss. A shudder went through him, he trembled beneath her, completely overwhelmed, eyes closed. And she pulled him upright again.

‘Go,’ she said simply.

He walked towards the door. But as he was leaving she took him in her arms again, humble and coaxing, her face raised to him, rubbing her pussycat’s chin against his waistcoat.

‘Where’s this house then?’ she asked very softly, with a shy laugh like a child who is coming round grudgingly to accepting something nice which she had at first refused.

‘Avenue de Villiers.’*

‘Will there be carriages?’

‘Yes.’

‘Diamonds and lace?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, how good you are, my pet! All that stuff just now was because I was jealous, you know. And this time I swear it won’t be like before, because now you know what a woman needs. You are giving me everything, right? So I don’t have to have anyone else. And from now on, this is all for you and only you! This, this, and this as well!’

When she had pushed him out of the door after inflaming his passion with a shower of kisses on his hands and face, she breathed hard for a moment. Heavens! What a bad smell there was in this little slut Mathilde’s room! It was warm and there was a calm atmosphere like in Provençal bedrooms in the winter sun. But really it smelled too much of stale lavender water, amongst other unsavoury things. She opened the window and leaned out again, examining the glass fronts in the Passage to pass the time.

Muffat stumbled down the staircase, his head in a whirl. What on earth was he going to say? How to tackle this business which was essentially no concern of his? He was just approaching the stage, when he heard someone having an argument. They were near the end of the second act, Prullière was getting angry, Fauchery had tried to cut one of his speeches.

‘Cut it all then,’ he cried. ‘I’d rather you did that. Oh, I don’t believe it! I haven’t even got two hundred lines and you are trying to cut more! No, I’ve had enough. I’m giving up the part.’

He took a little crumpled notebook out of his pocket, twisted it in his feverish hands, and made as though to throw it into Cossard's lap. His pale face was convulsed with bruised vanity, his thin lips, his angry eyes could not conceal the revolt going on inside. He, Prullière, the darling of the public, playing a role of only two hundred lines!

'Why not just have me bring in letters on a tray?' he asked bitterly.

'Come now Prullière, be a good fellow,' said Bordenave who was soft-soaping him because of his effect on the ladies in the boxes. 'Don't start making trouble. We will find you something special, won't we, Fauchery? You can add something extra, we could even lengthen one scene in Act Three.'

'Well,' declared the actor, 'I want the last speech before the curtain comes down. You owe me that at least.'

Fauchery's silence seemed to indicate his assent, and Prullière put his script back in his pocket, still ruffled and unhappy about it. During this altercation Bosc and Fontan had assumed an expression of bored indifference; every man for himself, it was no concern of theirs, they couldn't care less. And all the actors surrounded Fauchery, questioning him, fishing for compliments, while Mignon listened to Prullière's latest grumbles, still keeping his eye on Comte Muffat whose return he had been watching out for.

The count, in darkness as he came in, had stopped at the back of the stage, not wanting to intrude in the middle of a dispute. But Bordenave spied him and bustled over.

'Oh, these actors!' he muttered. 'Monsieur, you wouldn't credit what trouble I have with them. One as vain as the other. They are a scabby, cheating lot, always up to some dirty trick, they'd love to see me come a cropper... Forgive me, I am getting carried away...'

He stopped and there was silence. Muffat tried to think of a way of broaching the subject, but failed. In the end, to get it over with, he just came straight out with it:

'Nana wants the role of the duchess.'

Bordenave started up with a cry:

'What? Are you crazy?'

Then, seeing how pale and shaken the count was, he promptly calmed down.

‘Good God,’ he said simply.

And they were again silent. Basically he couldn’t care less. It might be rather amusing to cast this buxom wench in the role of the duchess. Anyway, if he went along with this, he’d have Muffat exactly where he wanted him. So he came to a swift decision. He turned and called:

‘Fauchery!’

The count had put out his arm to stop him. Fauchery did not hear. Cornered against the proscenium arch by Fontan, he was having to suffer long explanations as to how the actor viewed the role of Tardiveau. Fontan saw Tardiveau as coming from Marseilles, complete with the meridional accent, which he demonstrated; he declaimed whole speeches in this manner. Was it all right? He seemed to be tentatively suggesting things he wasn’t sure about himself. But when Fauchery raised objections and looked unimpressed, he immediately took offence. If he had not got into the spirit of his role, it would be best for everybody if he didn’t play it.

‘Fauchery!’ cried Bordenave again.

At that the young man, glad of the excuse, made his escape from the actor, who was offended by such a swift retreat.

‘Let’s go somewhere else,’ said Bordenave. ‘Come, Messieurs.’

To get away from eavesdroppers he took them into the props room behind the stage. Mignon, surprised, watched them disappear. They went down some steps. It was a square room with two windows that gave on to the yard. Beneath the low ceiling a dingy, greyish light entered through the dirty panes. There, on racks filling the entire room, were all manner of objects that looked like the junk from some second-hand bankrupt dealer’s in the Rue de Lappe,* an indescribable jumble of plates, gold cardboard goblets, old red umbrellas, Italian jugs, clocks of every kind, trays and inkwells, firearms and syringes, all chipped and broken and in unrecognizable heaps under a layer of dust an inch thick. And an unbearable smell of old iron, rags, and damp cardboard rose from these heaps where the debris of forgotten plays had been piling up for the last fifty years.

‘Come in,’ said Bordenave. ‘At least we shall be on our own.’

Very embarrassed, the count shuffled around waiting for the director to broach the subject himself. Fauchery was astonished:

‘What’s all this about?’ he asked.

‘Look,’ Bordenave came out with finally, ‘we’ve had an idea, but don’t jump out of your skin, will you, this is very serious. What do you say to Nana playing the duchess?’

The writer was dumbfounded. Then he exploded.

‘Oh, you must be joking! They would all laugh themselves silly.’

‘Well, if they do, that’s not such a bad thing! Think about it, my dear man. The count is very taken with the idea.’

Muffat, to hide his embarrassment, had just picked up from the dust an object that he seemed not to recognize. It was an egg cup whose base had been mended with plaster. He handled it without appearing to be aware of what he was doing and moved forward to murmur:

‘Yes, yes, that would be very good.’

Fauchery turned towards him abruptly with an impatient gesture. The count had no business interfering in his play. And he said clearly:

‘Never! Nana can play the cocotte as often as you like, but a society lady, never!’

‘I do assure you, you are wrong,’ Muffat went on, his confidence growing. ‘In fact, she has just been acting the part of a respectable woman for me...’

‘Wherever did she do that?’ asked Fauchery, more and more astonished.

‘Up there in a dressing room... Well, it was exactly right. So distinguished! The way she looks down on you, as she goes past, this kind of thing you know...’

And with his egg cup in his hand he tried to imitate Nana, forgetting himself in the desperate need to convince the gentlemen. Fauchery looked at him, flabbergasted. He had realized what was going on. He was no longer cross. The count, who felt his mocking, pitying eyes upon him, stopped, his cheeks colouring a little.

‘Goodness, I suppose we could...’ the writer muttered, to be amenable. ‘Perhaps she would do very well... Except that we have cast it already. We can’t take it away from Rose.’

‘Oh, if that’s all that’s stopping us,’ Bordenave remarked, ‘I’ll take care of that.’

But then, seeing that they were both siding against him and realizing that Bordenave had a secret interest in it, the younger man, in order not to

appear weak, rejected the idea even more violently, hoping in that way to bring the conversation to a close.

‘No, no, no! Even if the role wasn’t taken I would never give it to her... Is that clear? I haven’t any desire to kill my play off.’

There was an embarrassed silence. Bordenave, deciding that he was de trop, absented himself. The count stayed, with his head bowed. He looked up with an effort and faltered:

‘My dear fellow, supposing I asked you this as a favour?’

‘I can’t do it, I can’t,’ Fauchery repeated, defensively.

Muffat’s voice hardened:

‘I beg you... I demand it!’

And he stared at him. The younger man, seeing a black, menacing glare, abruptly gave way, stammering incoherently in reply:

‘Well, go ahead if you want to, I don’t give a damn. But you are going a bit far. You’ll see, you’ll see.’

The embarrassment then increased. Fauchery had leaned back against one of the racks and was nervously tapping his foot. Muffat seemed to be attentively examining the egg cup, still twiddling it round in his fingers.

‘It’s an egg cup,’ Bordenave, who had come back, said helpfully.

‘Ah yes, an egg cup,’ the count repeated.

‘Forgive me, you are covered in dust,’ the director continued, replacing the object on a wooden shelf. ‘But if we had to dust every day, we should never get to the end of it. So I’m afraid it isn’t clean. What a mess, eh? And you may not believe me, but all this is still worth a bit. Come and look.’

He accompanied Muffat past the racks, and in the greenish light coming in from the yard told him what all the properties were, wanting to interest him in what he was pleased to call, with a chuckle, his rag-and-bone man’s stockpile. Then lightly, when they had returned to Fauchery:

‘Listen, since we are all agreed, let’s wrap this business up. Ah, here’s Mignon!’

Mignon had been prowling up and down the corridor for a little while. At the first words of Bordenave, about breaking their contract, he became angry. It was dishonourable, his wife’s future career would be ruined, he would take them to court. Bordenave remained calm and gave his reasons. He considered the role unworthy of Rose, he would rather keep her in reserve for an operetta that they were intending to put on after *La Petite*

Duchesse. But as her husband was still sounding off, he suddenly suggested that they cancel the contract and mentioned the offers made to the singer from the Folies-Dramatiques. Then Mignon, briefly discomfited, but not denying the offers, professed a total disdain for the money. His wife had been taken on to play Duchesse Hélène and she was going to play it even if it meant Mignon losing his whole fortune. It was a matter of one's reputation, of honour. Once the dispute had taken this turn, it went on and on. The director kept coming back to the same argument. Since the Folies were offering three hundred francs a night to Rose for a hundred performances, while with him she was only earning a hundred and fifty, it was fifteen thousand francs more for her if he were to let her go. Her husband continued to argue on artistic grounds. What would people say if they saw his wife's part being taken away from her? That she wasn't good enough, that they'd had to replace her? It would do her considerable damage, her reputation as an actress would be diminished. No, no, never! Honour before riches! But he suddenly suggested a compromise: in her contract it stated that Rose had to pay a penalty of ten thousand francs if she left. Well, if they gave her ten thousand she would go to the Folies Dramatiques. Bordenave was left disconcerted while Mignon, keeping his eyes on Muffat, waited, completely unflustered.

'So, that's agreed then,' murmured Muffat in relief. 'We can come to an arrangement.'

'Oh no, we can't! It would be too stupid!' cried Bordenave, his business instincts getting the better of him. 'Ten thousand francs to let Rose off her contract! I should be a laughing stock.'

But the count, nodding at him frantically, was indicating he should accept. He still hesitated. But finally, rueing the ten thousand francs even though they didn't have to come out of his own pocket, he grunted:

'Well then, I might as well do it. At least I shall be rid of you.'

Down in the yard, Fontan had been listening to this for the last quarter of an hour. Very intrigued, he had gone down to take up a stand outside the window. When he realized what was being arranged, he went back up again and took great delight in telling Rose the news. There was an almighty rumpus about her and she was being chucked out. Rose rushed to the props room. Everybody fell silent. She looked at the four men. Muffat looked at the floor. Fauchery responded to her questioning look with a despairing

shrug. As for Mignon, he was discussing the terms of the agreement with Bordenave.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked curtly.

‘Nothing,’ said her husband. ‘Bordenave is paying you ten thousand francs to give up your role.’

She was trembling, very pale, her small fists clenched. For a moment she stared at him, her whole being in revolt against him, she who normally gave in meekly about business matters, leaving to him the signing of contracts with her directors and her lovers. But all she did now was lash out at him, saying ‘Oh, you coward!’ and then rushed off. Mignon, bewildered, ran after her. What was the matter then, had she taken leave of her senses? He explained in an undertone that ten thousand francs from one side and fifteen thousand from the other made twenty-five thousand. A splendid deal! Muffat was in any case leaving her in the lurch. It was a terrific coup to have bled him completely dry like that. But Rose was enraged and did not answer, so Mignon scornfully left her to her feminine sulks. He said to Bordenave who was going back to the stage with Fauchery and Muffat:

‘We’ll sign tomorrow morning. Make sure you bring the money.’

At that moment Nana, who had been alerted by Labordette, was coming triumphantly down. She was still acting the respectable woman, with distinguished gestures designed to impress her fellow actors and prove to these idiots that, when it suited her, she could be more ladylike than anyone. But she very nearly spoiled the whole effect. Rose, seeing her, flew at her, choking with rage, her words tumbling out:

‘I’ll pay you out, you’ll see... I’ve had enough of this.’

Forgetting herself in the face of this sudden attack, Nana was on the point of putting her hands on her hips and giving her an earful. But she managed to contain herself, exaggerating the fluting tones in her voice with the air of a marchioness who is about to step on orange peel.

‘Whatever is all this about?’ she said. ‘You are being so foolish, my dear!’

Then she continued to put on airs and graces while Rose left, followed by Mignon, who still could not understand his wife’s behaviour. Clarisse, delighted, had just obtained the role of Géraldine from Bordenave. Fauchery was walking back and forth very glumly, in two minds whether to stay or leave. His play was spoilt, he did not know how to rescue it. But

Nana came and caught hold of his hands, and pulled him to her, asking him if he found her so very dreadful. She would not ruin his play; and she made him laugh, she persuaded him that in his situation vis-à-vis the Muffats, he would be silly to get cross with her. If she couldn't remember a line, she would use the prompt. The theatre would be full. And he had got it wrong about her. She would bring the house down, he'd see. Then it was agreed that the author would rewrite the role of the duchess a little to give more lines to Prullière, who was thrilled. In the infectious cheeriness so natural to Nana, Fontan was the only one who remained aloof. Affecting a nonchalant pose, he sprawled out in the yellow beam of the lamp, which threw his bony goatlike profile into relief. Nana went over and held out her hand to him.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, not bad. How about you?'

'Very well, thank you.'

And that was all. It was as though they had only left each other the day before at the theatre door. Meanwhile the actors were waiting. But Bordenave said they would not do Act Three again. Just for once, old Bosc was there on time, but went off grumbling: they were being kept in the theatre unnecessarily, they were wasting entire afternoons. Everyone left. Out on the street they blinked, blinded by the daylight, dazed as people are who have spent three hours down in a cellar quarrelling and continually getting on each other's nerves. The count, his limbs aching, and his head empty, went off in a carriage with Nana while Labordette consoled Fauchery.

A month later, the first performance of *La Petite Duchesse* was a total disaster for Nana. She was terrible in the part, displayed pretensions to serious theatre, which made the public roar with laughter. They didn't jeer, because they found it so amusing. From her stage box, Rose Mignon greeted each appearance of her rival with a shrill laugh, setting off the whole audience. She had started to exact revenge. So when Nana in the evening found herself alone with Muffat, who was very upset, she said to him furiously:

'What a nasty bunch! All that, it's just jealousy! But if they only knew how little I care! What do I need them for now? I bet you a hundred louis that all those people laughing tonight, I'll have them worshipping the ground I tread on! Yes, I'll show your Paris what a fine lady I am!'

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CHAPTER 10

AND so Nana became a fashionable lady, queen of the boulevards, a woman of pleasure living at ease on the beastliness and stupidity of men. It was a sudden and definitive rise to fame in the glittering world of gallantry, financial folly, and reckless wastefulness of beauty. She immediately reigned among the costliest. Her photographs were displayed in shop windows and she was mentioned in magazines. Heads turned as she went by in her carriage on the boulevard and everyone murmured her name, with admiration, as though doing homage to a sovereign, while she sat back amidst her flowing dresses, smiling a happy little smile beneath the shower of small blonde curls which fell around her blue-shadowed eyes and painted red lips. And the wonder was that this buxom girl, so awkward on stage, so comical as soon as she tried to play a respectable woman, was bewitchingly alluring offstage, without any effort on her part. She had a lazy grace rather like a grass snake, a knowingly careless disorder in her dress, a most exquisite elegance, a nervous hauteur like a pedigree cat; she was the aristocrat of vice, splendid, rebellious, walking all over Paris society like an omnipotent mistress. She set the tone and noble ladies copied her.

Nana's town house was in the Avenue de Villiers, at the corner of the Rue Cardinet, in the elegant quarter just springing up in the middle of the waste ground on the old Monceau plain. Built by a young painter, intoxicated by his first flush of success but obliged to sell again almost before the plaster had dried, it was a palatial house in the Renaissance style, with an unusual interior, modern amenities in a setting of a somewhat studied originality. Comte Muffat had bought the house already furnished, filled with a whole world of knick-knacks, as well as some very fine furnishings from the East, antique sideboards, and large Louis XIII armchairs; and so Nana had inherited a collection of fine furniture, carefully chosen from a wide variety of different periods. But as the studio which occupied the centre of the house was no use to her, she had changed around the rooms of each floor, leaving a conservatory on the ground floor, as well as a large drawing room and dining room, and creating a small salon on the first floor next to her bedroom and dressing room. She surprised the

architect with the ideas she gave him, this Paris street girl with a flair for style, abruptly reborn into a life of refinement and luxury. But she did not spoil the house too much, and even added to the expensive furniture, apart from in one or two places where the few touches of sentimental foolishness and gaudiness betrayed the tastes of the former flower girl who had once upon a time dreamed her dreams outside the shop windows in the arcades.

In the courtyard, under the enormous glass canopy, a carpet led up the flight of steps; and when you reached the entrance hall you were met by the scent of violets, and a warm cosy atmosphere enclosed within the thick curtains. A window of yellow and pink glass, the colour of pale flesh, cast light on the wide staircase. At the bottom a Negro sculpted out of wood was proffering a silver tray, which held a pile of visiting cards. Four bare-breasted female figures in white marble held aloft the lamps, while bronzes and Chinese vases full of flowers, divans covered in ancient Persian rugs, and armchairs upholstered in ancient tapestry furnished the vestibule, adorned the landings, and made a kind of antechamber on the first floor where men’s coats and hats lay permanently around. The soft furnishings deadened the sound, there was an atmosphere of contemplation, and, on entering, you might have felt a thrill of devotion as in a chapel whose silence held a mystery behind its closed doors.

Nana opened the big over-ornate Louis XVI drawing room only on gala nights when she hosted society from the Tuileries or foreign dignitaries. Normally she only came down at mealtimes, feeling rather lost when she lunched alone in the dining room, a very high-ceilinged room with Gobelins tapestries* and a monumental sideboard enhanced by old porcelain and wonderful pieces of antique silver. She would go back up again quickly, she lived on the first floor, in her little apartment: the bedroom, the dressing room, and the small drawing room. She had already redecorated the bedroom twice, the first time in mauve satin, the second in blue silk with lace appliqué. And she still wasn’t satisfied, she thought it was too dull, she cast around but did not manage to find quite what she wanted. The richly upholstered bed, as low as a sofa, had twenty thousand francs worth of *point de Venise* lace* on it. The furniture was lacquered in white and blue, with a silver filigree pattern. White bearskins lay everywhere, so numerous that they covered the carpet. This was a fancy, a refinement, of Nana’s who had not been able to get out of the habit of sitting on the floor to take off her stockings. Adjacent to the bedroom, the small salon offered a curious

jumble of exquisite *objets d'art*; amongst the silk hangings of faded pink, a Turkish rose pink, embroidered with gold thread, was a whole world of objects from every country and of every style: Italian cabinets, Spanish and Portuguese coffers, Chinese pagodas, a Japanese screen with an exquisite finish, then some china, bronzes, embroidered silks, tapestries in petit point; the armchairs as wide as beds and the sofas deep as alcoves suggested a languid idleness, the sleepy life of a seraglio. The room had the tones of old gold, dissolving into greens and reds, nothing too obviously suggesting the courtesan except the luxurious sofas and chairs; and only two porcelain statuettes, a woman in her chemise searching for fleas and another who was stark naked, walking on her hands with her legs in the air, rather spoiled the salon with a stupidity quite peculiar to Nana. Through a door almost always open, the dressing room was visible, all in marble and mirrored, with the white bath, its jars and its silver basins, its decorations of crystal and ivory. A pale daylight filtered through the drawn curtain, sleepily, as it seemed, in the warm scent of violets, this troubling scent of Nana which penetrated the whole house and even the courtyard.

The most important thing was to get the domestic servants installed. Nana, admittedly, had the ever-faithful Zoë, who, quietly confident, had for some months been expecting this sudden elevation into society. Now Zoë came into her own as mistress of the house, feathering her own nest at the same time as looking after Madame as loyally as she could. But a lady's maid was no longer sufficient. They needed a butler, a coachman, a concierge, a cook. They must also establish the stables. There Labordette made himself very useful, taking responsibility for the chores that the count found boring. He negotiated the buying of the horses, he visited the carriage makers, guiding the choice of the young woman who was to be seen on his arm at the tradesmen's. Labordette even found the servants for her: Charles, a great giant of a coachman, who came from the staff of the Duc de Corbreuse; Julien, a small, smiling butler with curly hair; and a couple—the woman, Victorine, was the cook, and the man, François, was taken on as concierge and valet. He, in breeches and powdered wig, and wearing Nana's livery of light blue with a silver stripe, greeted visitors in the hall. It was all of a princely style and correctness.

After a month the house was ready. This whole enterprise cost more than three hundred thousand francs. There were eight horses in the stable and five carriages in the coach-house, one being a landau with silver trimmings,

which briefly captured the attention of the whole of Paris society. And in the midst of all this wealth, Nana was settling in and finding her feet. She had left the theatre after the third performance of *La Petite Duchesse*, leaving Bordenave to struggle with imminent bankruptcy, in spite of the money from the count. But she was still bitter about her lack of success. It was another hard lesson to learn after the business with Fontan, a sorry affair for which she held every man responsible. So now she felt herself to be very resilient and proof against passing fancies. But thoughts of revenge didn't last long in such a feather-brain. What remained, apart from the times when her temper got the better of her, was her insatiable appetite for spending money, a natural contempt for the man footing the bill, the constant caprices of a spendthrift and wasteful woman, proud of her ability to ruin her lovers.

First Nana put the count on a proper footing. She set out the rules of their relationship very clearly. He was to give her twelve thousand francs a month, not counting presents, and would only ask for absolute faithfulness in return. She swore to be faithful. But she demanded consideration, a complete freedom in her role as mistress of the house, and a total respect for her wishes. Thus she would be able to entertain her friends every day; he would only arrive at fixed times. And finally he would have a blind faith in her in all matters. And when he hesitated, seized with jealousy and anxiety, she got on her high horse, threatening to return everything he had given her, or else she swore on the head of little Louis. That ought to be enough. There was no love if there was no respect. By the end of the first month Muffat did respect her.

But she wanted—and she obtained—more. Soon in her good-natured fashion she began to exert some influence over him. When he arrived looking glum, she cheered him up and when he told her his troubles she gave him advice. Little by little she became involved in his domestic concerns, his wife, his daughter, his love life and his financial affairs, she was full of good sense, fairness and honesty. Once only did she let her temper get the better of her, the day when Muffat confided that Daguenet was probably going to ask for the hand of his daughter Estelle. Ever since the count's dealings with her had become public knowledge, Daguenet had thought it would be a clever move to break off relations with Nana and treat her like a slut, swearing he would snatch his future father-in-law away from the clutches of that creature. So she painted a pretty picture of her former

lover: he was a womanizer who had wasted all his fortune on loose women. He lacked all moral sense, he didn’t exactly steal money from other people, but he took advantage of them, only paying for the occasional bunch of flowers or dinner. And as the count seemed to be making excuses for these weaknesses, she told him, without sparing any of the gruesome details, that Daguenet had bedded her. Muffat grew very pale. This young man was out of the question. That would teach him to be so ungrateful!

Meanwhile before the house had been completely furnished, Nana, having showered Muffat with the most passionate promises of fidelity one evening, spent the night with Count Xavier de Vandeuvres, who for the last fortnight had been paying court to her with persistent visits and flowers. She gave in to his demands, not because she had taken a shine to him, but rather to prove to herself that she was a free woman. The thought that he might be financially useful to her came later, when, on the following day, Vandeuvres helped her out with paying a bill which she did not feel inclined to tell Muffat about. She was sure she could sting Vandeuvres for eight to ten thousand francs a month, and it would be very welcome pin money. At that time he was getting through his fortune in a feverish fit of madness. Lucy and his horses had devoured three farms and Nana would make short work of his last remaining chateau near Amiens. And he was in a hurry to make a clean sweep of everything, even the remains of the old tower built in the reign of Philippe Auguste* by a Vandeuvres who had a voracious appetite for ruins. He thought it rather fine to leave the last gold bezants* of his coat-of-arms in the hands of this courtesan whom the whole of Paris desired. He too accepted Nana’s conditions, total freedom, intimate relations on certain days, without even being passionately naïve enough to demand sworn promises from her. Muffat suspected nothing. As for Vandeuvres, certainly he knew, but gave not the least hint of knowing. He pretended ignorance, with the thin, sceptical smile of one who does not demand the impossible as long as he has his allotted time and that Paris is fully aware of it.

From then on, Nana’s house was well and truly finished. The staffing in the stables, the kitchen, and Madame’s bedroom was complete. Zoë arranged everything, sorted out even the most unforeseen complications. It was like a well-oiled machine, a theatre, regulated like a huge business enterprise, and functioned with such precision that for the first months there were no hitches or disasters. But Madame caused Zoë a lot of trouble

through her unwise and impulsive behaviour, and her bravado. So the lady's maid relaxed little by little, having in any case observed that she earned a lot more at those times when there was a problem, when Madame had done something stupid and she had to put it all to rights again. Then the presents came pouring in, she fished plenty of louis out of the troubled waters.

One morning when Muffat had not yet left the bedroom, Zoë let a man, trembling all over, into the dressing room, where Nana was changing her underwear.

'Goodness, it's Zizi!' exclaimed the young woman, flabbergasted.

It was indeed Georges. But seeing her in her chemise with her golden hair falling over her naked shoulders, he threw himself at her, flung his arms round her, and began kissing her from head to toe. She struggled, startled, stifling her voice and stammering:

'Stop it, he's there! It's silly... Are you mad, Zoë? Take him away! Keep him downstairs, I'll try to come down.'

Zoë had to push him downstairs in front of her. In the dining room when Nana was able to join them, she scolded them both. Zoë pinched her lips and withdrew looking annoyed, saying she thought Madame would be pleased. Georges looked at Nana with such delight at seeing her that his beautiful eyes filled with tears. Now that the bad days had passed, his mother believed that he had seen sense, and had allowed him out of Les Fondettes; so on arrival at the station he had just taken a cab to go and kiss his darling with all speed. He talked of living henceforth by her side as in the old days when he used to wait for her in the bedroom at La Mignotte, barefoot. And as he told her his story, his fingers reached out in his desperation to touch her after that cruel year of separation. He caught hold of her hands, felt feverishly for her arms in the ample sleeves of her dressing gown, travelled up to her shoulders.

'Do you still love your Bébé?' he asked in his childish voice.

'Of course I do!' answered Nana, briskly extricating herself. 'But you have come without any warning. I'm not free you know, my pet. You must be a good boy.'

Georges, who had got out of the cab still in a daze at the thought that his long-felt desire was finally about to be fulfilled, had not even noticed what house he was entering. He became aware of a change in his surroundings.

He examined the opulent dining room with its high ornamental ceiling, its Gobelins tapestries, its dresser with the shining silverware.

‘Oh yes,’ he said sadly.

And she made him understand that he should never come in the mornings. In the afternoon, if he liked, from four till six; that was the time when she received callers. Then, as he was looking at her questioningly in mute supplication, in her turn she planted a very affectionate kiss on his forehead.

‘Be a good boy, I’ll do what I can,’ she murmured.

But the truth was that she was no longer bothered about him. She thought Georges a very nice boy and would have liked him as a friend, nothing more. However, when he arrived every day at four, he seemed so unhappy that she often gave in to him, hid him in her wardrobes, and let him continually pick over the leftovers of her beauty. He never left the house, as domesticated as little Bijou, the dog, both of them in the skirts of their mistress, enjoying some part of her, even when she was with another man, making the most of every opportunity for sweet treats and caresses in her hours of loneliness and ennui.

Probably Madame Hugon learned about her son’s new fall from grace into the arms of this loose woman, for she rushed up to Paris to ask for help from her other son, Lieutenant Philippe, then garrisoned at Vincennes. Georges, who was hiding from his elder brother, was desperate, fearing he would be forcibly removed by him. And as he could not keep anything from Nana in his passionate eagerness to tell her everything, he soon began to talk of little else but his big brother, a strapping young man, both brave and daring.

‘You see,’ he explained, ‘Maman won’t come to your house when she can send my brother instead. She’ll send Philippe to fetch me, I know.’

The first time he said this, Nana was very hurt. She said curtly:

‘I’d like to see him do that! Even if he is a lieutenant François will show him the door, he’ll kick him out!’

Then, as the boy kept bringing up the subject of his brother, before long she became interested in Philippe. After a week she knew him in every minute particular: very tall, very strong, jolly and a little bit rough; also some intimate details: hairy arms, a birthmark on his shoulder. The result

was that one day, with her head full of the image she had of this man she was supposed to be throwing out, she exclaimed:

‘So he’s not going to come, your brother... He must be scared.’

The next day while Georges was alone with Nana, François came up to ask if Madame would receive Lieutenant Philippe Hugon. Georges grew very pale and muttered:

‘I thought as much. Maman hinted something to me this morning.’

And he begged the young woman to send François to say she wasn’t at home. But Nana was already on her feet, her cheeks flushed, saying:

‘Why ever not? He would think I’m frightened of him. Well, we shall have some fun. François, let the gentleman wait a quarter of an hour in the salon. Then you can bring him up.’

She did not sit down again, but stayed on her feet, rather flustered, going from the mirror over the mantelpiece to the looking glass hanging over an Italian chest. And every time she glanced at herself and essayed a smile, while Georges, collapsed on a sofa, quaked at the scene that was about to ensue. As she walked up and down she spoke aloud, in snatches:

‘If he has to wait a quarter of an hour, it’ll calm him down... And anyway if he thinks he’s coming to see a whore, he’s going to be astonished by my salon... “Yes, that’s right, my dear man, have a good look round. It’s not rubbish. It’ll teach you to respect the lady of the house.” What matters is that a man respects you. Don’t you think so? Is it a quarter of an hour yet? No, only ten minutes. Oh well, plenty of time.’

She couldn’t keep still. After fifteen minutes she sent Georges away, making him swear not to listen at the keyhole for it would be unseemly if the servants were to see him. As he was going into the bedroom, Zizi ventured in a strangled voice:

‘Don’t forget he’s my brother...’

‘Don’t worry,’ she said in a dignified voice. ‘If he’s polite, I shall be polite too.’

François ushered in Philippe Hugon, who was wearing a frock coat. At first Georges tiptoed across the room to do as the young woman said. But the voices drew him back, and he was so unsure and anguished that his legs felt wobbly. He was imagining catastrophes, blows, something unspeakable that would permanently thwart his relations with Nana. So he could not resist the need to come and press his ear to the door. He could hardly hear a

thing, the thickness of the portières muffled the sound. However, he caught something of what Philippe said, some harsh phrases where he could make out the words ‘child’, ‘family’, ‘honour’. In the anxiety about what his darling Nana would say in reply, his heart started pounding so that there was a buzzing and confusion and dizziness in his head. For certain she would fling out a ‘dirty bastard’ or ‘clear off, this is my house!’ But nothing of the sort was forthcoming, not a whisper. It was as if Nana was dead in the other room. And soon his brother’s voice grew softer. He was at a loss to understand, when a strange sound utterly stupefied him. It was Nana sobbing. For a moment he was prey to conflicting feelings, whether to escape or walk in and confront Philippe. But just at that moment Zoë came into the bedroom and he moved away from the door, ashamed of being discovered there.

Unperturbed, she tidied away linen in the wardrobe; while silent, motionless, he pressed his forehead against a windowpane, eaten up with doubt.

‘Is that your brother with Madame?’

‘Yes,’ the boy replied in a strangled voice.

There was another silence.

‘And it worries you, does it, Monsieur Georges?’

‘Yes,’ he got out, in the same tone of suffering.

Zoë was in no hurry. She folded the lacy underwear and said slowly:

‘You needn’t worry... Madame will sort it out.’

And that was all. They said no more. But she remained there in the bedroom. She pottered around for more than a quarter of an hour, not apparently noticing the mounting exasperation of the boy, white with trying to suppress his anxiety. He was throwing sideways glances towards the salon. Whatever could they be doing all this time? Perhaps Nana was still weeping? His cruel brother must have been boxing her ears. So when Zoë finally went, he ran to the door, pressing his ear again to the keyhole. But then he was dumbfounded and his head started spinning, for what he heard was a sudden burst of laughter, affectionate whispered exchanges, the suppressed giggles of a woman being tickled. Almost immediately after, Nana was seeing Philippe out to the top of the stairs, with friendly and familiar words being exchanged.

When Georges plucked up the courage to go into the salon, the young woman was standing looking at herself in the mirror.

‘Well?’ he asked, terrified.

‘Well, what?’ she said without turning round.

Then, in a casual voice:

‘What were you saying about your brother, by the way? He’s very nice!’

‘So have you sorted everything out?’

‘Of course I have. What are you worried about? You’d think we were going to come to blows.’

Georges still didn’t understand. He stammered:

‘I thought I could hear... You weren’t crying?’

‘Crying, me!’ she exclaimed, staring at him. ‘You must be dreaming! Why should you think I was crying?’

And now the boy himself was upset when she told him off for being disobedient and for sneaking up behind the door. Seeing her sulking at him, he approached her again meekly, wanting to know what had happened.

‘So what about my brother...?’

‘Your brother saw immediately what kind of house he was in. You have to realize I might have been a prostitute and in that case his intervention would have been quite understandable because of your youth and the honour of your family. Oh, I understand how he felt... But one glance was enough, and he behaved like a gentleman... So don’t worry any more, it’s over and he will set your maman’s mind at rest.’

And she went on, with a laugh:

‘Anyway you’ll see your brother around… I invited him to call, so he’ll be back.’

‘Oh, so he’ll be back,’ said the boy, growing paler.

He did not add anything, and there was no more talk of Philippe. She got dressed to go out and he gazed at her with his big sorrowful eyes. No doubt he was very pleased that things had been sorted for he would have preferred to die rather than have no more dealings with her. But deep down he had a nagging worry which he didn’t dare express, an ache he had not felt before. He never did know how Philippe had set their mother’s mind at rest. Three days later she went back to Les Fondettes, seeming satisfied. That evening at Nana’s he was aghast when François announced the arrival of the lieutenant. The latter joked in a cheery fashion and treated him as a naughty

boy whom he had helped in some trivial escapade. Georges remained glum, not daring to move, blushing like a girl at whatever was said. Philippe being ten years his senior, they had not spent much time in each other's company; rather he feared him, like a father from whom you conceal your amorous adventures. So he felt an uneasy shame seeing him so relaxed in Nana's company, laughing out loud, really enjoying himself, like the healthy young man he was. However, since before long his brother visited every day, Georges ended up getting in some measure used to it. Nana was radiant. It was her last accomplishment in the management of her love affairs, an insolent house-warming in a house that was bursting at the seams with men and furniture.

One afternoon when the Hugon boys were there, Comte Muffat arrived outside his allotted time. But, when Zoë told him that Madame was with friends, he did not go in and made a show of tactfully withdrawing in the manner of a discreet gentleman. When he turned up again later that evening, Nana greeted him with the iciness of a woman who has been sorely offended.

'Monsieur,' she said. 'I have not given you any cause to insult me. Do you hear! When I am at home I beg you to visit at the proper time like everyone else.'

The count was open-mouthed in astonishment.

'But my dear...' he began.

'I suppose it's because people come and visit me? Yes, well there *were* men there. But what do you imagine I do with those men? Women are compromised if you put on those gentlemanly airs of being so discreet, and I personally don't wish to be compromised!'

He had his work cut out to obtain her forgiveness. Deep down he was delighted. It was with such scenes as these that she kept him docile and unsuspecting. For a long time he had had to put up with Georges, a child whom she found amusing, so she said. She made him have dinner with Philippe and the count behaved in a friendly manner towards him; when they were leaving the table, he took the young man on one side and asked for news of his mother. From then on the Hugon brothers, Vandeuvres, and Muffat were quite openly part of the household and were on the friendliest of terms. It suited everyone better like that. But Muffat was still discreet enough not to come too often, keeping up a pretence of formality, like a stranger visiting. At night when Nana was sitting on the floor, on her

bearskin, taking off her stockings, he talked amiably about these men, especially Philippe, who was a truly faithful friend.

‘You’re right, they are very nice,’ said Nana, who had remained on the floor to change her chemise. ‘But you see they realize who I am. You only have to say the word and I’ll kick them out!’

However, in this opulence, surrounded by her courtiers, Nana was bored stiff. She had men enough to fill every minute of her nights and money even in the drawers of her dressing table all mixed up with the brushes and combs. But that no longer satisfied her, she felt as if there were something missing, a void in her life that made her yawn. Her idle life dragged on, it was just the same old routine, over and over again. Taking no thought for the morrow, she lived like a little bird, sure of being fed and ready to tuck her head in on the first available branch. The knowledge that all her needs would be met made her lie around the whole day, making no effort, slumbering in a schoolgirlish indolence, imprisoned in the profession of courtesan. Since she only went out in her carriage, she lost the use of her legs. She reverted to childish pastimes, covered Bijou with kisses from morning to night, killed time with stupid pursuits, waiting, but only ever for a man, to whom she submitted with weary complaisance. And in the middle of that self-abandonment, her only concern was the way she looked. Unceasingly she took care of her body, washing herself, perfuming herself all over, proud of her ability to strip naked at any moment in front of anyone without blushing.

In the mornings Nana got up at ten o’clock. Bijou, the little Scottish terrier, woke her up by licking her face. And then they had a romp for five minutes, with the dog running all over her arms and legs, which caused Comte Muffat some distress. Bijou was the first little man he was jealous of. It was indecent that an animal should put his nose under the covers like that. Then Nana went into her bathroom to take her bath. Towards eleven Francis came to put up her hair before the more elaborate coiffure in the afternoon. And as she hated eating on her own, she almost always ate lunch with Madame Maloir, who arrived from somewhere mysterious in the morning in one of her extravagant hats and went back in the evening to her secret life which nobody cared about anyway. But the worst time of day was the two or three hours between lunch and when she dressed for the evening. Normally she asked her old friend if she would fancy a game of bezique; sometimes she would read the *Figaro*, as she took an interest in

what was happening in the theatre and society; it even occurred to her sometimes to open a book, for she prided herself on knowing about literature. It took her till nearly five to get ready. Only then did she wake from her long hours of inertia, going out in the carriage or receiving a host of men, dining often in town, going to bed very late only to get up the next day as tired as ever and once more start her day, which always resembled the one before.

Her greatest entertainment was to go to Batignolles to see her little Louis at her aunt's house. She would forget about him completely for a fortnight. Then she would fly into a frenzy, rush there on foot, like a natural, tender loving mother, bringing the sort of presents you might take to someone in hospital, snuff for her aunt, oranges and biscuits for the little boy. Or else she would arrive in her landau on her way back from the Bois wearing outfits that caused a real stir in the quiet street. Ever since her niece had risen in the world, Madame Lerat was swollen with pride. She appeared rarely in the Avenue de Villiers, pretending it was not her place to do so, but she crowed in delight when the young woman arrived with her four- or five-thousand-franc dresses, and spent the whole of the following day showing her presents to people and citing figures which astounded the neighbours. Most often Nana kept Sundays for her family. And on those days if Muffat invited her out she would refuse, smiling like a good little mother. She couldn't, she was dining at her aunt's, she was going to see Baby. Besides, poor little Louiset was always ill. He was getting to be almost three, quite a big boy now. But he'd had eczema on the back of his neck and now there were deposits forming in his ears which made them afraid it might be the bones in his skull decaying. When she saw his pale complexion and his skin so flabby and jaundiced-looking, she became concerned. What could be the matter with this little love to have got into this sorry state, when she, his mother, was so healthy!

On the days when she was not occupied with her son, Nana reverted to her bustling routine, drives in the Bois,* theatre premieres, dinners and suppers at the Maison d'Or* or the Café Anglais, then all the spectacles to which the crowd flocked, Mabille,* the revues, the races. But she still had this stupid, debilitating feeling of pointlessness which was giving her a sort of cramp in her stomach. Her constant infatuations afforded her little relief from her boredom, and as soon as she was alone, she would yawn and stretch in a gesture of immense fatigue. Then, when she was on her own,

she was straight away plunged into deep depression, for it made her face the void of her own emptiness once more. Normally very cheerful in her work and in her nature, at such times she grew morose, continually summing up her life, in between two yawns, with the cry:

‘Oh, what pests men are!’

One afternoon as she was returning from a concert, Nana noticed a woman walking briskly along the pavement of the Rue Montmartre with holes in her little boots and her skirts dirty, and a hat that was soaked by the rain. Suddenly she realized who it was.

‘Stop, Charles!’ she cried to the coachman.

And she called out:

‘Satin, Satin!’

Passers-by turned round and the whole street gazed at her. Satin had drawn nearer and was getting even dirtier from the wheels of the coach.

‘Get in, my dear,’ said Nana calmly, unbothered by the onlookers.

And she pulled her up next to her into the coach in that filthy state, and they drove off in her light blue landau with her pearl-grey silk dress trimmed with lace, while the whole street smiled at the coachman’s highly dignified bearing.

From then on, Nana had one overriding passion. Satin became her vice. She was installed in the house on the Avenue de Villiers, washed, clothed, and for three days she told her about Saint-Lazare and the problems with the sisters in the hospital and those swine the police who had made her register as a prostitute. Nana was indignant, comforted her, swore to get her out of that even if she had to go and see the minister herself. Meanwhile there was no hurry, for of course they wouldn’t come looking for her in her house. And afternoons of intimacy began between the two women, tender conversations and kisses interspersed with giggles. It was the fun and games that had been interrupted by the arrival of the police in the Rue de Laval and which started up again in a light-hearted fashion. Then one evening it changed into something more serious. Nana, who had been so disgusted at Laure’s, now understood. She was excited and overwhelmed. All the more so because on the morning of day four, Satin disappeared. No one had seen her go out. She had run off in her new dress, needing some fresh air, hankering after her life on the street.

That day there was such a to-do in the house that all the servants kept their heads down and didn't say anything. Nana almost came to blows with François who had failed to bar her exit. But she tried to contain her anger. She called Satin a dirty slut; that would teach her to pick up rubbish like her out of the gutter. In the afternoon when Madame locked herself in her room, Zoë heard her sobbing. Suddenly that evening she ordered her carriage and drove to Laure's. The thought struck her that she would find Satin at the restaurant in the Rue des Martyrs. It wasn't just to see her, she intended to give her a good hiding. And indeed there was Satin dining at a little table with Madame Robert. When she saw Nana, she began to giggle. Nana, cut to the quick, did not make a scene, but on the contrary was very gentle and amiable. She paid for champagne, got five or six tables merry, and then carried Satin off while Madame Robert was in the lavatory. Only when she was in the cab did she bite her and threaten to kill her if she did it again.

But then the same thing happened on numerous other occasions. In her rage at being deceived, she ran after this tramp a score of times, this girl who, bored with the comforts of the town house, vanished whenever the fancy took her. Nana talked of boxing Madame Robert's ears; one day she even thought of challenging her to a duel. There was one person too many in this ménage. Nowadays when she dined at Laure's she wore her diamonds, sometimes taking with her Louise Violaine, Maria Blond, and Tatan Néné, all decked out in their jewels. And in the greasy atmosphere of the three rooms in the yellow glare of the gas lamps, these ladies flaunted their riches in front of the riff-raff, delighted at impressing the little street girls from that district and carrying them off when they left the table. On those days Laure, tightly-corseted and beaming, kissed everyone with even more maternal feeling than usual. Satin, however, in the middle of all this carry-on, with her blue eyes and her pure virginal looks, kept perfectly calm. Bitten and beaten, pulled this way and that between two women, she simply said it was a funny state of affairs and they would do better to come to some compromise. It didn't help to slap her, she couldn't chop herself in two, in spite of wanting to be nice to everyone. In the end it was Nana who won because she overwhelmed Satin with affection and presents. And to take revenge, Madame Robert wrote anonymous poison pen letters to her rival's lovers.

For some time now Comte Muffat had been looking worried. One morning, rather distressed, he placed before Nana an anonymous letter in

which she read in the very first lines that she was accused of deceiving the count with Vandeuvres and the Hugon boys.

‘It’s not true, it’s not true,’ she shouted vehemently in accents of rare honesty.

‘Do you swear to that?’ Muffat asked, already relieved.

‘Yes, on whatever you like... On my child’s head if you like!’

But it was a long letter. Her relationship with Satin was detailed in words of crude vulgarity. When she had finished, she smiled.

‘Now I know who sent it,’ she said simply.

And as Muffat was expecting a denial, she went on tranquilly.

‘It’s something which is no concern to you, my lamb. Why should it bother you?’

She didn’t deny anything and he made some disgusted remarks. Then she shrugged. What sort of world did he live in? It went on everywhere, and she named her friends, swore that society ladies did it too. In fact, to hear her talk, there was nothing more common or more natural. But what wasn’t true wasn’t true. So just now he had seen how indignant she was about Vandeuvres and the Hugon boys. Oh, for that he would have been within his rights to strangle her. But what was the point of lying to him about something of no consequence? And she repeated her sentence:

‘Why should you bother about that, for heaven’s sake?’

Then as the scene dragged on, she cut him off harshly:

‘Anyway, my dear, if you are not happy about it it’s very simple... The door is open... There it is! You have to take me as I am.’

He looked at the floor. Deep down he was satisfied with the young woman’s solemn promises. When she saw what power she had over him, she was no longer so careful of his feelings. And from then on Satin was installed in the house openly on the same footing as the gentlemen. Vandeuvres had not needed anonymous letters to understand; he made jokes about it, tried to pick jealous quarrels with Satin; while Philippe and Georges treated her like a chum, shaking her hand and making very indecent remarks.

One evening Nana had an adventure when, after the little slut had gone off, she had dined at the Rue des Martyrs but wasn’t able to lay hands on her. As she was eating alone, Daguenet had appeared. Although he was a reformed character, he sometimes came back, seeking his old life of

debauchery once again and hoping he wouldn't meet anyone he knew in these insalubrious sleazy back streets of Paris. So the presence of Nana seemed to embarrass him at first. But he wasn't a man to beat a retreat. He approached her with a smile. He asked whether Madame would kindly allow him to dine at her table. Seeing him in a jocular mood, Nana adopted her cool haughty tone and answered curtly:

'Sit where you please, Monsieur. We are in a public place.'

Begun in this way, the conversation appeared droll. But at dessert, Nana, annoyed and dying to get the upper hand, put her elbows on the table; then, calling him 'tu' again:

'Well, what about your wedding plans, sweetie? How is it going?'

'Not very well,' Daguenet admitted.

In fact just when he was about to pluck up courage to ask Muffat and his household, he had felt such a *froideur* on the part of the count that he had prudently refrained. He thought it would be a failed attempt. Nana stared at him with her clear eyes, chin in hand and an ironic pursing of her lips.

'Oh, what a naughty girl I am,' she said slowly. 'Because... you'll have to get your future father-in-law out of my clutches... Well, for an intelligent young man you are really pretty stupid! What! Fancy telling tales to a man who adores me and tells me everything! Listen, you will get married if I want you to, my sweet—and not otherwise.'

He had felt for the last few minutes that this was the case and had already started planning to do whatever she asked. However, he kept up the banter, not wanting to allow the whole business to become too serious. And after he had put on his gloves, he asked her in the most formal language for the hand of Mademoiselle Estelle de Beuville. She ended up laughing as though she was being tickled. Oh, that Mimi! You couldn't be cross with him for long. The great success of Daguenet with women was due to his velvety voice, a pure, modulated tone, which had made women give him the nickname 'Velvet-Tongue'. None of them could resist that caressive, melodious voice. He knew the power of it, and he lulled her into a dreamy state by recounting a string of ridiculous anecdotes. When they left their table she was all pink-cheeked, quivering on his arm, seduced by him once again. As it was very fine weather, she sent her carriage back and walked with him to his house, then, without more ado, went upstairs. Two hours later she said, as she got dressed:

‘Well then, Mimi, are you still set on this wedding?’

‘It’s the best thing I could do, you know. I’m completely broke. ’

She called him over to button up her boots. And a moment or two later:

‘Oh goodness, I’m happy to put in a word for you. She’s as dry as a stick, that girl. But if that suits you all, it suits me too and I’ll fix it for you.’

Then, starting to laugh, her breasts still bare:

‘But what will you give me?’

He had seized hold of her, kissing her shoulders in a rush of gratitude. Quivering with excitement, she fought him off and leaned back.

‘I know!’ she cried, very excited by this game. ‘Listen to what I demand for my commission. On your wedding day, you can give me the gift of your innocence... Before your wife, you understand!’

‘That’s right, I will!’ he said, laughing even louder than her.

This transaction tickled them. They thought it would be a really good story.

And in fact the next day there was a dinner at Nana’s, the usual Thursday dinner with Muffat, Vandeuvres, the Hugon boys, and Satin. The count arrived early. He needed eighty thousand francs to pay off two or three debts Nana had incurred and to give her a necklace of sapphires which she was longing to have. As he had just been eating quite deeply into his fortune, he was looking for someone to lend him the money, not yet prepared to take the step of selling one of his properties. On the advice of Nana, Muffat had spoken to Labordette, but he had considered it too big a matter to take on himself and had wanted to talk to Francis, the hairdresser, who was only too happy to oblige his lady clients. The count put himself into the hands of these gentlemen, on the strict understanding that his name would be kept out of it. Both undertook to keep in hand the hundred-thousand-franc bill that he’d sign, and apologized for the twenty thousand francs of interest, loudly condemning the scoundrels they’d had to use as moneylenders. When Muffat was announced, Francis was finishing dressing Nana’s hair. Labordette was also present in the dressing room, being an intimate friend that no one bothered about. When he saw the count, he discreetly put a thick wad of banknotes down among the powders and pommades, and the bill was signed on the marble top of the dressing table. Nana wanted to keep Labordette for dinner but he refused as he was showing a rich foreigner round Paris. Meanwhile Muffat took him on one

side to urge him to hurry to Beckers, the jewellers, and bring him back the sapphire necklace which he wanted to give the young woman as a surprise that same evening; Labordette willingly undertook to do this. Half an hour later Julien handed the jewel box surreptitiously to the count.

Nana was on edge during dinner. The sight of eighty thousand francs had made her nervous. Just think of all that money going to tradesmen! She was disgusted. From the soup course on in that splendid dining room gleaming with the reflections of silver and crystal, she waxed sentimental and was extolling the blessed state of the poor. The men were in dress suits, she herself was wearing a white embroidered satin dress while Satin wore a more modest black silk with a simple gold heart on a chain round her neck, a present from her dear friend. And behind the guests, Julien and François waited on them, assisted by Zoë, all three of them very dignified.

‘Of course I enjoyed myself more when I didn’t have any money,’ Nana repeated.

She had placed Muffat on her right and Vandeuvres on her left. But she did not look at them, only at Satin who was ensconced opposite her between Philippe and Georges.

‘Don’t you think so, darling?’ she said every other sentence. ‘Didn’t we have fun in the old days when we used to go to Mother Josse’s school in the Rue Polonceau?’

The roast was served. The two women launched into their reminiscences. Now and then they were seized with the desire to chatter on endlessly; they suddenly needed to rake up this dirt from their youth, and it was always when there were men present, as though they were indulging a furious wish to place the blame on them for the midden on which they had grown up. The gentlemen went visibly pale, and looked at one another in embarrassment. The Hugon boys forced a laugh, while Vandeuvres nervously twiddled his beard round and round and Muffat grew more solemn than ever.

‘Do you remember Victor?’ said Nana. ‘Now *he* was a bad boy, taking little girls down into cellars!’

‘Yes, very well,’ Satin replied. ‘I remember the big yard where you used to live. There was a concierge with a broom...’

‘Old Mother Boche. She died.’

‘And I can still see your shop... Your mother was a very large woman. One day when we were playing, your father came back really really drunk!’

At that moment Vandeuvres broke in, in an attempt to divert the conversation from the women’s reminiscences.

‘I say, my dear, I’d love some more of those truffles. They are delicious. I ate some yesterday at the Duc de Cambreuse’s but they were nowhere near as good.’

‘Julien, truffles!’ bawled Nana.

Then, returning to the subject:

‘Oh yes, Papa wasn’t a sensible man at all. And what a downfall! If you had seen him, well, it was a disaster. Totally bankrupt! Oh, you can’t imagine what I had to put up with, it’s a miracle I survived, unlike Papa and Maman.’

This time Muffat, who was playing with his knife, getting irritated, allowed himself to intervene.

‘What you are telling us isn’t very cheerful.’

‘What? What do you mean? Not cheerful?’ she cried, looking daggers at him. ‘You bet it’s not cheerful! Someone should have given us something to eat, my dear man. Oh, I’m an honest girl, you know, I tell you things straight. Maman was a washerwoman, Papa drank, and it killed him. There it is. If you don’t like it, if you are ashamed of my family...’

They all protested. Whatever did she mean by that? They respected her family. But she went on:

‘If you are ashamed of my family, well then, you can go, because I’m not one of those women who deny their father and mother. You have to take me as you find me, do you understand?’

They took her as they found her, they accepted her—Papa, Maman, the past, whatever she wanted. Eyes on the table in front of them, all four now made themselves small, while, infuriated and omnipotent, she walked all over them with her muddy old shoes from the Rue de la Goutte d’Or. And she did not then put down her weapons: they might bring her fortunes, build her palaces, but she would always regret the apple-crunching days of her youth. Money was ridiculous, it was a big joke, only good for the likes of tradesmen. Finally her anger subsided in the expression of a sentimental desire for the simple life, a generosity of spirit in the midst of universal goodness.

But at that instant she caught sight of Julien, his arms dangling, who was standing there waiting.

‘Well then, what are you waiting for? Pour the champagne,’ she said. ‘Why are you looking at me like that, you goose?’

During the scene, the servants had not smiled. They appeared not to hear, and grew more dignified as Madame grew more hysterical. Julien, without flinching, started to pour the champagne. Unfortunately François, who was handing round the fruit, tipped the bowl too much and the apples, pears, and grapes rolled over on to the table.

‘You clumsy oaf!’ cried Nana.

The valet mistakenly tried to explain that the fruit were not balanced properly. Zoë had disturbed them when she took the oranges.

‘So Zoë is the goose,’ said Nana.

‘Madame,’ murmured the lady’s maid, in a hurt voice.

Straight away Madame rose and in clipped tones with a voice of regal authority, said:

‘That’s enough, don’t you think? You may leave, all of you. We don’t need you any more.’

She calmed down after this decisive pronouncement. She became abruptly more gentle, more amiable. The dessert was delightful, the gentlemen enjoyed serving themselves. But Satin, who had peeled a pear, had come to eat it behind her lover, leaning on her shoulder, whispering things down her neck which made them laugh out loud. Then she wanted to share her last piece of pear with Nana, and presented it to her between her teeth, and both of them nibbled with their lips and finished eating the pear in a kiss. At that the gentlemen pretended to protest. Philippe told them not to feel embarrassed. Vandeuvres asked if they should leave the room. Georges came and put his arm round Satin’s waist and conducted her back to her place.

‘How silly you are!’ Nana said. ‘You are making my little sweetheart blush. Go on, my dear, let them make fun of us. It’s nobody’s business but ours.’

And when she turned to Muffat, who was watching, she said seriously:

‘That’s right isn’t it, my love?’

‘Of course,’ he said quietly, nodding his head slowly.

There were no more protests. In the midst of these gentlemen, these grand names, the old respectability, the two women sitting opposite one another exchanged a loving look, imposed their will and triumphed, calmly abusing the power of their sex and frankly contemptuous of the male. The gentlemen applauded them.

They went up to have coffee in the small salon. Two lamps shone with a soft light on the pink curtains, the lacquer ornaments, and the old gold. At this time of the evening amongst the chests, bronzes, and porcelain, the light played softly over the inlaid silver and ivory, bringing out the shine on the carved frames and making the silk panels glisten. The afternoon's fire was dying into glowing embers, it was hot, a drowsy warmth was enclosed within the curtains and the portières. And in this room, which so evoked the intimate life of Nana, with her gloves lying around, a dropped handkerchief, an open book, you could imagine her *en déshabillé,* with her scent of violets, her feminine untidiness, and amid so much luxury the effect was charming. The capacious armchairs, as big as beds, and sofas deep as alcoves invited you to sleepy hours of soft laughter and amorous whisperings in the dark, where you could forget all time.

Satin went and stretched out on a deep sofa near the fire. She had lit a cigarette. But Vandeuvres created a mock-jealous scene of some vehemence, threatening to challenge her to a duel if she went on distracting Nana from her duties in that fashion. Philippe and Georges joined in, teasing her, and pinching her so hard that she ended up shouting:

'Darling, darling! Make them stop! They are still after me.'

'Come on now, leave her alone,' said Nana, growing serious. 'I don't want you to torment her, you know that. And you, my sweet, why do you have any truck with them, you know how silly they are?'

Satin, pink-cheeked, poked her tongue out and went into the dressing room through the wide-open door from which you could see the white marble surfaces in the milky light of a gas lamp's frosted globe. Then Nana, charming hostess that she was, chatted to the four men. That day she had read a novel which was all the rage, the story of a prostitute. And she was indignant, she said it was quite untrue, and declared that she found such literature, which claimed to reflect life as it really was, disgusting, highly offensive. As if a writer could possibly describe everything! What were novels written for? To help you pass the time agreeably of course! On the subject of books and plays Nana had very fixed opinions. She wanted to

read works that were romantic and noble, things that made her dream and would elevate the soul. Then the conversation got round to the troubles which were besetting Paris, incendiary articles, the beginnings of rioting in the wake of the calls to arms issued each evening in public meetings. She launched into an attack on the Republicans. What were they trying to do, these dirty people who never washed? Were they not happy? Had the Emperor not done everything for the People? The People were a rum lot, and no mistake! She knew exactly what they were like, so she could speak about it. And forgetting the respect that she had just been demanding at table for her friends in the Rue de la Goutte d'Or, she showered abuse on them with all the disgust and fears of a woman who has risen in society. That afternoon in fact she had read in the *Figaro* the account of a session of a public meeting which had turned into a farce and she was still laughing about it because of the bad language and ugly face of a drunkard who had got himself kicked out.

'Oh, these drunks!' she said in disgust. 'No, their Republic would be a terrible catastrophe for everybody, you know. Oh, let's trust that God will keep the Emperor safe as long as possible!'

'God will hear your prayer,' Muffat replied solemnly. 'Don't worry, the Emperor is safe.'

He was pleased to know her opinions were sound. In the matter of politics they were of one mind. Vandeuvres and Captain Hugon, as well, were constantly making jokes about the riff-raff who ran away at the first sight of a bayonet. But tonight Georges was looking pale and gloomy.

'What's the matter with my Bébé then?' asked Nana noticing his glum face.

'Me? Nothing. I'm just listening,' he murmured.

But he was suffering. As he left the table, he had heard Philippe joking with the young woman. And now it was Philippe, not Georges, who found himself sitting by her. His whole chest swelled and burst without him knowing why. He could not stand them being near each other like that, such awful, anguished feelings choked him that he was ashamed. He who had enjoyed a joke with Satin, who had accepted Steiner then Muffat, then all the others, was outraged, he saw red at the thought that Philippe might one day touch this woman.

‘Here you are, take Bijou,’ she said to comfort him, and passed him the little dog asleep on her skirt.

And Georges cheered up, holding something of her, this animal still all warm from being on her lap.

They had fallen to discussing the considerable loss suffered by Vandeuvres the day before at the Cercle Impérial. Muffat was not a gambler and expressed surprise. But Vandeuvres smilingly referred to his imminent ruin, and that Paris was already gossiping about it. The exact way you died did not matter, the only important thing was to die well. For some time Nana had noticed the nervous twitch of his mouth and the gleam which came and went in the depths of his bright eyes. He retained his aristocratic dignity, and the refined elegance of impoverished nobility. Only now and then something vertiginous turned briefly in that skull of his, emptied by gambling and women. One night when he was lying next to her, he had scared her by telling her a terrible story: he was thinking that once he had nothing left to consume he would lock himself up in his stables and set himself and his horses on fire. His only hope now was his horse, Lusignan, which he was getting ready for the Prix de Paris. This horse was his lifeline, all his insecure credit rested on it. At every new demand by Nana, he put her off until June, hoping Lusignan would win.

‘Pooh,’ she said, joking. ‘It doesn’t matter if he does lose, he’ll clean everybody out at the races.’

His only answer was a thin mysterious smile. Then, lightly:

‘By the way, I took the liberty of giving your name to my outsider, a filly—Nana, Nana, sounds good doesn’t it! You aren’t cross?’

‘Why should I be cross?’ she said, secretly delighted.

The chatting continued. They were talking about an upcoming execution the young woman was longing to go and see, when Satin appeared at the door of the dressing room, urgently asking her to come. She got up at once and left the gentlemen stretched out at ease and finishing their cigars as they discussed an important question—how responsible for his actions was a murderer affected by chronic alcoholism? In the dressing room Zoë, collapsed on a chair, was weeping copiously while Satin was vainly trying to comfort her.

‘What’s the matter then?’ asked Nana in surprise.

‘Oh darling, talk to her,’ said Satin. ‘I’ve been trying to make her see sense for a good twenty minutes. She’s crying because you called her a goose.’

‘Yes Madame, it’s not fair, it’s not fair...’ stammered Zoë, choked by a new attack of sobbing.

Immediately this sight melted the young woman’s heart. She uttered some words of consolation. But as Zoë wouldn’t be pacified, she crouched down beside her and put her arms around her in a gesture of affectionate familiarity.

‘But, silly, I said goose quite without thinking! Don’t mind me! I was cross. There, there, I was wrong, calm yourself.’

‘And I am so fond of Madame,’ Zoë faltered. ‘After all I’ve done for Madame...’

Then Nana kissed the maidservant, and, wanting to prove she wasn’t cross, she gave her a dress that she had only worn three times. Their quarrels always ended up with presents. Zoë dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. She took the dress away on her arm and said again that they were all sad in the kitchen, that Julien and François had not been able to eat because Madame’s anger had taken away their appetite. And Madame sent them a louis apiece by way of reconciliation. She could not bear anyone being unhappy around her.

Nana was returning to the salon, glad to have sorted out this squabble which was making her dread the next day, when Satin whispered something urgently in her ear. She was complaining, threatening to leave if the gentlemen went on teasing her. And she demanded that her darling get rid of them all that night. That would teach them! It would be so nice to be on their own, just the two of them. Nana, anxious again, swore it wouldn’t be feasible. Then Satin shouted at her like a petulant child imposing her authority.

‘I insist! Send them away or else I go!’

And she went back into the salon, stretched out on a divan to one side near the window, silent and inert, her big eyes fixed on Nana, waiting.

The gentlemen had eventually decided against the new-fangled theories of criminality. The lack of responsibility in certain pathological cases was a fine invention! So there weren’t any criminals any more, only sick people! The young woman, nodding agreement, was trying to work out how to get

rid of the count. The others were about to leave. But he would be sure to insist on staying. And indeed when Philippe got up to go, Georges followed him straight away. His only worry was that he might leave his brother behind. Vandeuvres stayed another few minutes. He was waiting to see how the land lay, whether Muffat by any chance had a pressing engagement and would leave the field to him. Then, when he saw him definitely settling down for the night, he did not insist, but tactfully took his leave. As he was making for the door, however, his glance fell on Satin, and he stared at her. And no doubt realizing the situation, and amused by it, he came over and shook her hand.

‘We’re still good friends, aren’t we?’ he muttered. ‘Forgive me. You are the nicer one, on my honour!’

Satin did not deign to reply. Her eyes did not leave Nana and the count now they were on their own. Hesitating no longer, Muffat went to sit next to the young woman, took her hand, kissed her fingers. So to make conversation, she asked if his daughter Estelle was feeling better. The day before, he had complained that his little girl was very sad. He never had a day of happiness at home, with his wife always out and his daughter withdrawn into her own silent world. As far as these family matters were concerned, Nana was always full of good advice. And when Muffat, physically and mentally beginning to unwind, began to go over it all again, Nana remembered the promise she had made and said:

‘Supposing you married her off?’

She was brave enough to immediately speak of Daguenet. At the mere mention of his name, the count was appalled. No, never! After what she had told him!

She pretended to be astonished, then burst into laughter. And putting her arms round his neck:

‘Oh, you jealous boy! How can you? Be sensible. They were saying things about me and I was furious. But now I’d be sorry...’

Then over Muffat’s shoulder she met Satin’s eyes. Nervously, she let him go and continued in an earnest voice:

‘That wedding must go ahead, my friend. I don’t want to be an obstacle to your daughter’s happiness. That young man is very nice, you won’t find anyone better than him.’

And she launched into an improbable eulogy of Daguenet. The count had caught hold of her hands again. He no longer said no, he would see, they would discuss it. Then, when he talked of going to bed, she lowered her voice and gave him her reasons. Impossible, she was indisposed. If he loved her a little, he would not insist. But he was obstinate, he refused to leave, and her resolve was weakening when she met Satin's eyes again. Then she would not be moved. No, it was impossible! The count, looking very upset, had risen and was looking for his hat. But at the door he remembered the sapphire necklace in its box that he could feel in his pocket. He had planned to hide it at the bottom of the bed so that she would feel it with her legs when she got into bed first, a childish surprise that he had been planning since dinner. And in his distress, in his anguish at being sent away like that, he brusquely handed her the box.

'What's that?' she asked. 'Oh goodness! Sapphires! Oh yes, that necklace. How kind of you! Tell me darling, is it the same one? In the window it looked more impressive.'

That was the only thanks he got. She let him leave like that. He had just noticed Satin lying there, saying nothing, waiting. Then he looked at the two women and no longer insisted, but obediently went downstairs. The hall door had not even closed when Satin grabbed Nana round the waist, and began dancing and singing. Then, running to the window:

'You ought to see his face out there in the street!'

In the shade of the curtains the two women leaned on the wrought-iron window ledge. One o'clock struck. The Avenue de Villiers, deserted, stretched away with its double row of gas lamps into the damp March night, swept by great showery gusts of wind. Dark patches of wasteland could be seen; houses under construction rose up with their scaffolding beneath the night sky. And the pair started to giggle uncontrollably at the sight of Muffat's hunched, disconsolate figure, reflected on the wet pavement as he made his way across the icy barrenness of the new Paris. But Nana made Satin be quiet.

'Be careful! The police!'

Then they suppressed their giggles, watching in dumb fear two dark figures walking in step along the opposite side of the avenue. Nana, despite her luxurious house and her regal attitude, attributes of a woman who is used to being obeyed, had never lost her terror of the police, disliking to hear them spoken of, as much as she did death. She felt uneasy when a

policeman looked up at her house. You never knew with folk like that. If they heard them laughing at that time of night, they could very well take them for prostitutes. Satin, with a little shiver, had pressed close to Nana. They stayed there, all the same, intrigued by the approaching light of a lantern dancing on the puddles in the road. It was an old rag-and-bone woman who was searching along the gutter. Satin recognized her.

‘Look!’ she exclaimed. ‘There’s Queen Pomaré* with her wicker basket!’

And as a damp gust of wind whipped at their faces, she told her lover the story of Queen Pomaré. Oh, she was a splendid girl in the old days, the whole of Paris was obsessed with her beauty. A bold young hussy she was, she led men by the nose, noblemen in tears outside her door! And now she was a drunkard, the local women got her to drink absinthe for a laugh. And street urchins ran after her on the pavement and threw stones. Well it was a real come-down, a queen fallen into the mire. Nana listened, and her blood ran cold.

‘Watch!’ Satin added.

She whistled like a man. The rag-and-bone woman beneath the window raised her head and was visible in the yellow light of her lantern. In this bundle of rags under a torn headscarf, a face showed, livid and scarred, with a toothless hole for the mouth, and eyes that were sore and inflamed. And Nana, seeing the dreadful old age of this harlot soused in alcohol, brought to mind from way back the vision of Irma d’Anglars in Chamont, the ancient whore crowned with years and honours ascending the steps of her chateau surrounded by servile villagers. Then, as Satin whistled again, and was laughing at the old woman who couldn’t see her:

‘Let’s go, the police are coming!’ she muttered in changed tones. ‘Let’s go in quick, my pet!’

The measured steps were returning. The women closed the window. As she turned, Nana, her hair damp, shivered a moment and stared at her salon as if she had forgotten where she was and had come back into a place she didn’t recognize. The warm scent of it was a surprise and a pleasure. The rich furnishings, the antique furniture, the gold silk stuffs, the ivories, the bronzes were slumbering in the pink glow of the lamps; while the whole silent house was pervaded by a feeling of great luxury in the solemn formality of the reception rooms, the spacious comfort of the dining room, the discreet quiet of the wide staircase, and the softness of the rugs and

chairs. She felt it to be a sudden extension of her own personality, of her need for power and pleasure, of her desire that everything should be hers, to have and to destroy. Never before had she felt the power of her sex so profoundly. She looked slowly round and proclaimed in an earnest, philosophical tone of voice:

‘Well, we’re right to make the most of it while we are young!’

But Satin was already rolling around on the bearskin rugs in the bedroom and calling:

‘Come on! Come on!’

Nana got undressed in the adjoining room. To save time, she took hold of her thick blonde hair with both hands and shook it out over the silver sink, her long hairpins falling like hail as they tinkled on to the shining metal.

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CHAPTER 11

THAT Sunday, on one of the first warm days of June, under a stormy sky in the Bois de Boulogne the Paris Grand Prix was being run. In the morning the sun had risen out of a reddish haze. But towards eleven, just when the carriages were arriving at the racecourse at Longchamp, a southerly wind swept away the clouds and large gaps of an intense blue stretching right across the horizon swallowed up the grey vapours of mist. And in the bursts of sunshine between two patches of cloud, everything suddenly lit up; the turf was gradually filled with the hubbub of carriages, people on horseback and on foot, the racetrack itself still empty, with the judge's stand, the finishing post, the poles displaying the results, and then on the other side, in the middle of the weighing enclosure, the five tiers of the grandstand built of bricks and wood rising symmetrically up. Beyond, bathed in the midday sun, stretched the vast, level plain, edged with bushes, bounded to the west by the wooded slopes of Saint-Cloud and Suresnes, dominated by the arresting form of Mont Valérien.

Nana, as excited as if her fortune were going to be decided by the Grand Prix, wanted a place at the fence next to the finishing post. She had been one of the first to arrive, very early, in a landau trimmed with silver, drawn by four magnificent white horses harnessed Daumont-style,* a present from Comte Muffat. When she appeared at the entrance to the ground with two mounted postilions trotting along on the left, and two footmen standing behind the carriage, there was a great stir among the crowd as though a queen were passing by. She wore the colours of the Vandeuvres stables, blue and white, and was wearing an extraordinary costume: a little bodice and tunic of blue silk moulding her body, hitched up hugely in a brazen fashion (in this age of very full skirts), drawing attention to her curves. Her dress was of white satin, with white satin sleeves and a white satin scarf, the whole outfit trimmed with silver guipure lace* which shone in the sun. And to make her look even more jockey-like, she daringly sported a blue toque with a white feather atop her chignon, her auburn tresses flowing down her back like the very long tail of a chestnut mare.

Twelve o’clock struck. More than three hours to wait for the Grand Prix. When the landau had drawn up against the fence, Nana made herself at home. She had had the quaint idea of bringing Bijou and Louiset. The dog, lying in her lap, was trembling with cold in spite of the heat. The child, all dolled up with ribbons and lace, had a pathetic little waxen face, silent, pale in the open air. Meanwhile the young woman, with no thought for her neighbours, talked very loudly to Georges and Philippe Hugon sitting in front of her on the other seat amongst such a great mound of bunches of flowers, white roses and blue forget-me-nots, that they were up to their ears in them.

‘So,’ she was saying, ‘since he bored me to tears, I showed him the door. And he’s been sulking for the last two days.’

She was speaking of Muffat, only she did not admit the true reason for that first quarrel. One evening he had found a man’s hat in her bedroom, a ridiculous passing fancy, someone she had picked up from the street because she was bored.

‘You can’t imagine what a queer cove he is,’ she continued, enjoying giving them the lowdown. ‘Basically he’s a real hypocrite. He says his prayers every night. Honestly! He thinks I don’t notice anything because I am first in bed, I don’t want to get in his way; but I half close my eyes and spy at him, he mumbles away and makes a sign of the cross as he is turning to climb over me and lie down next to the wall.’

‘The crafty so-and-so,’ muttered Philippe. ‘He does that before and after, then?’

She laughed out loud.

‘Yes, that’s right, before and after! When I’m going to sleep I can hear him mumbling on again… But what I find annoying now is that we can’t have arguments any more without him coming over all religious. Now as for me, I’ve always been religious, of course, yes, you may laugh, but I shan’t stop believing what I believe. Only he gets on my nerves, he starts snivelling, he talks about how remorseful he is. So, the day before yesterday after we had fallen out, he had a real crisis and I was rather alarmed…’

But she broke off to say:

‘Oh look! Here are the Mignons. Goodness, they’ve brought the children along! What *do* they look like!’

The Mignons were in a landau painted in sombre colours, to all appearances a comfortably well-off bourgeois couple. Rose, wearing a grey silk dress with ruffles and red bows, was smiling, pleased by Henri and Charles's delight at being allowed to sit on the front seat, though they were uncomfortable in their school uniform which was too big for them. But when the landau had come to a stop by the fence and she caught sight of a triumphant Nana surrounded by her flowers with her four horses and livery, she pursed her lips very tight and turned away. Mignon on the other hand, the picture of health and cheery affability, waved a greeting. On principle he did not have anything to do with women's quarrels.

'By the way,' Nana resumed, 'do you know a little old man, very clean and tidy, with bad teeth? A Monsieur Venot… He called on me this morning.'

'Monsieur Venot,' Georges exclaimed. 'You don't say! He's a Jesuit.'

'Yes, that's right, I thought as much. Oh, you wouldn't believe our conversation! It was so funny! He talked about the count, of the problems in his marriage, and begged me to let the family live in harmony again… Very polite he was, by the way, very friendly. Well, I told him nothing would suit me better, and I promised to get the count back with his wife… I'm serious, you know, I'd be delighted to see them all happy, that lot! I should be thankful, because some days, to tell you the truth, he drives me to distraction.'

Her boredom of the last months was evidenced in this *cri de cœur.* And moreover the count seemed to have a whole lot of financial worries. He was anxious, and it was beginning to look as if he would not be able to pay the bill made out to Labordette.

'And talking of Muffat, the countess is over there,' said Georges, who was scanning the stands.

'Where is she?' cried Nana. 'Bébé has such good eyesight! Here, hold my sunshade, Philippe.'

But Georges in one swift movement had got there before his brother, delighted to hold the blue silk sunshade with the silver fringe. Nana was scanning the stands with her enormous field glasses.

'Oh yes, I can see her,' she said eventually. 'In the stand on the right by a pillar, isn't she? She's wearing mauve and her daughter's in white next to her… Oh look, there's Daguenet going to shake hands with them!'

Then Philippe mentioned the forthcoming wedding of Daguenet and the gawky Estelle. It was all organized, they were publishing the banns. The countess was against it at first but they said the count had insisted. Nana smirked.

‘I know, I know,’ she murmured. ‘Good for Paul. He deserves it, he’s a nice boy.’

And bending down to Louiset:

‘Tell me, my pet, are you having a nice time? You look so serious!’

The little boy, unsmiling, was studying all these people, like a little old man, as though he were full of unhappy thoughts about what he was seeing. Bijou, who had been tipped off the young woman’s lap as she was getting up and down, went to snuggle up next to the child, still trembling.

Meanwhile the turf was filling up. Carriages were continually arriving at the Porte de la Cascade in an orderly line that went on and on. There were huge charabancs like the Paulina, with fifty passengers, that had started from the Boulevard des Italiens, and which drew up on the right of the stands. Dog carts, victorias, and beautifully turned-out landaus all mingled with inferior cabs bumping along behind old nags; and four-in-hands with their four horses in front, and mail coaches and their owners sitting aloft on their seats, leaving their servants inside to keep the baskets of champagne safe. There were spider carriages as well, with enormous wheels flashing like steel, and light curricles,* elegant as the workings of clocks which ran along jingling their little bells. The occasional rider went by, a flood of pedestrians ran in panic between the carriages. Suddenly on the ground, the distant rumbling which came from the avenues in the Bois gave way to a soft rustling. Nothing more could be heard except the din of the gathering crowd, shouting, calling, and whip cracks borne away in the open air. And when amid the gusts of wind, the sun reappeared on the edge of a cloud, a gold streak lit up the harnesses and varnished coach-panels and set the ladies’ dresses aflame; while the coachmen, high up on their boxes, holding their great whips, gleamed in the flash of sunlight.

But Labordette was getting out of a barouche where Gaga, Clarisse, and Blanche de Sivry had kept a place for him. As he was hurrying across the track and going into the weighing enclosure, Nana asked Georges to call him over. Then, when he arrived:

‘What am I worth?’ she laughed.

She meant the filly, Nana, the Nana which had been beaten ignominiously in the Prix de Diane, and even last April and May had not been placed when she ran in the Prix Des Cars and the Grande Poule des Produits, which was won by Lusignan, the other horse in Vandeuvres's stable. Immediately Lusignan had become the clear favourite; for the last day or so, he was generally quoted at two to one.

'Still at fifty to one,' was Labordette's answer.

'Heavens, I'm not worth much,' Nana went on, amused by her own joke. 'So I shan't back… No dammit, I'll not put a louis on me.'

Labordette, who was in a great hurry, was leaving. But she called after him. He kept up with his acquaintances in the world of trainers and jockeys and had detailed information about the stables. His predictions had already come good dozens of times. He was known as the king of tipsters.

'Tell me, which horses should I back?' the young woman repeated. 'What are the odds on the English one?'

'Spirit? at three to one… Valerio II, three to one as well. Then all the others, Cosinus at twenty-five to one, Hasard at forty to one, Boum at thirty to one, Pichenette at thirty-five to one, Frangipane at ten…'

'No, I shan't bet on the English horse. I'm patriotic. What do you think? Valerio II maybe? The Duc de Corbreuse was looking very pleased with himself just now. Well no, I think after all, fifty louis on Lusignan. What do you reckon?'

Labordette gave her a queer look. She leaned over and asked him confidentially, for she knew that Vandeuvres, to give himself a free hand, got him to place his bets for him at the bookmakers. If he knew something, he might as well tell her. But without further explanation Labordette persuaded her to go with her instinct. He would place her fifty louis as he thought best and she wouldn't regret it.

'On all the horses you want!' she cried gaily, letting him go. 'Except for that old nag Nana!'

In the carriage they doubled up with laughter. The young people thought the joke hilarious, while Louiset, puzzled, looked up at his mother, surprised by her loud laughter. But Labordette still could not escape, Rose Mignon had waved at him to come over and was giving him orders, he was jotting down numbers in a notebook. Then Clarisse and Gaga called him back to change their bets. They had heard rumours in the crowd, they did

not want to bet on Valerio II now, they were going for Lusignan. He was scribbling away imperturbably. He fled at last and was seen disappearing to the other side of the track between two stands.

More and more carriages were arriving. Now they were drawn up five deep along the fence, a dark spreading mass with flecks of a lighter colour made by the white horses. Then, beyond them, singly, other carriages which appeared to have been stranded on the grass, a jumble of wheels, vehicles pointing in all directions, side by side, diagonally, horizontal, head to head. And on the patches of turf that were still clear, the riders trotted, while darker groups of pedestrians were constantly on the move. Up above this fairground scene and the motley colours of the crowd, the grey canvas roofs of the drinking booths could be seen, looking whiter in the intermittent sunlight. But the surge of people with their bobbing hats crowded mostly around the bookmakers who were standing up in open carriages, gesticulating like dentists, their odds pasted on tall boards beside them.

‘All the same, it’s silly not to know which horse to bet on,’ said Nana. ‘I’ll have to risk a few louis myself.’

She had got to her feet to choose a bookmaker whom she liked the look of, but when she caught sight of a whole bunch of her friends, she forgot what she was about to do. Apart from Mignon, Gaga, Clarisse, and Blanche to the right and left at the back, there were, in the middle of the cabs which were now crowding round and hemming the landau in, Tatan Néné with Maria Blond in a victoria; Caroline Héquet with her mother and two gentlemen in a barouche; Louise Violaine on her own, driving herself in a little jingle with ribbons in the orange and green colours of the Méchain stables; and Léa de Horn on a high seat in a mail coach with a bunch of rowdy young men. Further off in a luxurious phaeton, Lucy Stewart cut a distinctive figure in a very simple black silk dress next to a tall young man who wore the costume of a naval officer. But what astounded Nana was to see Simonne arrive in a tandem driven by Steiner, with a footman motionless, arms folded, behind them. She was dazzling, all in white satin with yellow stripes, covered with diamonds from the waist up, while the banker, cracking his huge whip, was spurring on the two horses harnessed in tandem—the leader, a dainty little golden chestnut mare, the second a big brown bay, a high-stepper lifting his legs in the air as he trotted along.

‘Lord,’ exclaimed Nana, ‘that thief Steiner has cleaned out the Bourse again! Look how chic Simonne is! She’s getting above herself, we’ll have

to take her down a peg or two.’

Yet she exchanged a greeting from a distance. She waved, smiled, turned round, included everyone to make sure they could all see her. And she carried on chatting.

‘But that must be Lucy’s son she’s dragged along! He looks very dashing in his uniform. So that’s why she’s looking so smart! She’s afraid of him, you know, and pretends she’s an actress. Poor boy, all the same! He doesn’t suspect anything, apparently.’

‘Pooh,’ muttered Philippe with a laugh. ‘She’ll find him an heiress in the country when she sees fit.’

Nana stopped talking. She had just caught sight of the Tricon woman in among the carriages. Arriving in a cab from which she could see nothing, she had calmly climbed up on to the coachman’s seat. And up there, her tall figure with her noble face and long ringlets looked down over the crowd, queening it over her other women. They all smiled at her discreetly. She, in her superior way, pretended she hadn’t noticed them. She wasn’t there to work, she was following the races for pleasure, a fanatical punter with a passion for horses.

‘Look! That idiot La Faloise!’ said Georges suddenly.

There was surprise all round. Nana could not recognize her friend La Faloise these days. Since he had come into his inheritance he had become extraordinarily smart. Wearing a light material with a wing collar which clung to his thin shoulders, and his hair curled, he affected a weary gait and a drawl, using modish words and sentences which he did not take the trouble to finish.

‘Well, he looks wonderful!’ Nana declared, completely charmed.

Gaga and Clarisse had called to La Faloise, throwing themselves at him in a bid to get him back but he turned from them at once with a movement that was both scornful and mocking. He was completely dazzled by Nana, he came rushing across and stood on the step of the cab, and as she teased him about Gaga, he murmured:

‘Oh no, the old guard is finished! Don’t talk about her anymore! Henceforth ’tis thou, my Juliet!’

He had placed his hand on his heart. Nana burst out laughing at this sudden public declaration. But she went on:

‘Oh, get on with you! You made me forget I was meaning to have a bet… Georges, you see that bookmaker over there, the big fat one with red cheeks and crinkly hair? I think he’s a bit of a scoundrel, and I like the look of him… Go and lay a bet on… Oh Lord, which one *shall* I bet on…?’

‘Oh, I’m not patriotic, oh no, not me!’ stuttered La Faloise. ‘I’m betting everything on the English horse. If he wins, that’s fine! Let the French one go to the devil!’

Nana was scandalized. Then they discussed the merits of the horses. La Faloise, pretending to be very au fait, called them all a lot of hacks. Frangipane belonging to Baron Verdier was by The Truth out of Lenore, a big bay who would have had a chance if they hadn’t flogged him to death during training. As for Valerio II from the Corbreuse stable, he wasn’t ready, he’d had violent colic in April. Oh, they tried not to let it get out but he was damned certain of it! And he ended up advising her to back Hasard, a horse from the Méchain stable, the worst of the lot, that nobody thought was any good. Hasard was in superb form, dammit, and look at the way he was running! Now there was an animal who would surprise everybody!

‘No,’ said Nana. ‘I’m going to put ten louis on Lusignan and five on Boum.’

At this La Faloise exploded.

‘But my dear girl, Boum is no earthly good. Don’t back him! Even Gasc isn’t backing his own horse! And as to your Lusignan, not a chance! You must be joking! By Lamb out of Princess, just think! By Lamb and Princess, never! All too short in the leg!’

He was choking with indignation. Philippe objected that Lusignan had nevertheless won the Prix Des Cars and the Grande Poule des Produits. But that set La Faloise off again. What did that prove? Nothing at all. On the contrary, it made you wary. And in any case it was Gresham riding Lusignan, so enough said! Gresham was jinxed, he’d never make it.

The argument in Nana’s landau seemed to spread from one end of the enclosure to the other. A high-pitched shouting broke out, the passion for betting swept through the ground, faces lit up, arms waved wildly while bookmakers perched high on their cabs were yelling odds and furiously scribbling numbers. Large bets were being placed in the weighing enclosure, so what you could hear were the punters placing lesser bets, the small fry frantically risking a hundred sous; it was an open display of greed

of all sorts, on the chance of winning a few louis. The fiercest battle would be waged between Spirit and Lusignan. English punters, easy to spot, walked amongst the groups as though they were at home, their faces flushed, already convinced they would win. Bramah, a horse belonging to Lord Reading, had won the Grand Prix the year before. It was a defeat from which people were still smarting. This year it would be a disaster if France was beaten again. So all the ladies were getting excited, full of patriotic pride. The Vandeuvres stables became the champion of French honour, they asserted the winner would be Lusignan, they defended their choice, they praised him to the skies. Gaga, Blanche, Caroline, and the others were betting on Lusignan. Lucy Stewart didn't bet because of her son. But the rumour went round that Rose Mignon had asked Labordette to stake two hundred louis. Only La Tricon, sitting near her driver, was waiting till the last minute. Keeping her cool in the midst of all the wrangling, dominant in the mounting din where horses' names were perpetually tossed back and forth in the rapid exchanges of the Parisians mingling with the guttural exclamations of the English, she was listening, and noting down everything in her dignified fashion.

'And Nana?' Georges enquired. 'Does nobody want to bet on her?'

It was true she wasn't in demand, she wasn't even mentioned. The outsider from the Vandeuvres stable was nowhere compared with the popularity of Lusignan. But La Faloise raised his hands and said:

'I've had an idea… I shall put a louis on Nana.'

'Bravo! I'll put two louis,' said Georges.

'Three,' said Philippe.

And they increased it, good-humouredly paying court to Nana, throwing numbers around as though they were bidding for her at an auction. La Faloise was talking of covering her in gold. In fact everybody ought to join them, they would canvass the punters. But as the three young men were about to go and rally support, Nana shouted:

'I don't want to bet on her, you know! Not the least bit! Georges, ten louis on Lusignan and five on Valerio II.'

But they had disappeared. She watched delightedly as they wove their way between the wheels and ducked under the horses' heads and ran the length of the turf. As soon as they spotted someone they knew in a cab, they hurried over and told them to bet on Nana. And loud bursts of laughter

rippled through the crowds when they occasionally turned round, triumphantly indicating numbers with their fingers, while the young woman stood there waving her parasol. But they didn’t have much luck. A few men were persuaded. Steiner, for instance, quite excited at seeing Nana again, risked three louis. But the women refused point-blank. No thank you, they would be certain of losing! Why should they be in any hurry to encourage a slut like her, lording it over them with her four white horses, her postilions, and bossing everybody around in that way of hers. Gaga and Clarisse edgily enquired of La Faloise if he was having them on. When Georges had the nerve to stand in front of the Mignons’ landau, Rose was beside herself with rage and looked the other way, not answering. You had to be a real piece of trash to allow your name to be given to a horse! But Mignon, on the other hand, was amused and watched the young man depart, saying that women always brought good luck.

‘Well?’ asked Nana, when the young men came back after a long visit to the bookmakers.

‘You are at forty to one,’ said La Faloise.

‘What? Forty to one?’ exclaimed Nana, shocked. ‘I was at fifty to one, what’s going on?’

Just then Labordette reappeared. The track was being closed, the ringing of a bell announced the first race. And in the roar of anticipation, she questioned him about this sudden shortening of the odds. But he gave her an evasive answer; undoubtedly there had been bets placed. She had to be satisfied with that explanation. Moreover, Labordette, who seemed preoccupied, announced that Vandeuvres would come over if he could get away.

The race was finishing, almost unnoticed in the wait for the Grand Prix, when a cloudburst struck the Hippodrome. The sun had gone in a short while before, the darkening sky cast a livid light over the crowd. The wind got up, and there was a sudden heavy downpour with enormous drops. The rain tipped down on them. There was a moment of confusion, shouting, joking, cussing, when those on foot went charging towards the refuge of the canvas booths. In the carriages the women tried to shelter, holding their parasols with both hands while worried footmen rushed over to the hoods. But the rainstorm was already almost over, the sun was shining again through the curtain of raindrops which still hung in the air. A blue gap opened behind the clouds as they were borne away above the Bois. And it

was as though the sky were smiling, making the women, now reassured, smile again; while amongst the snorting of the horses, and the agitation of this crowd soaked to the skin and shaking off the wet, a cloth of gold lit up the grass running with drops of crystal.

‘Oh, poor little Louiset!’ said Nana. ‘Are you very wet, my lamb?’

The little boy said nothing but allowed his hands to be wiped dry. The young woman used her handkerchief. Next she patted Bijou who was trembling more than ever. It was nothing, just a few marks on her white satin dress. She didn’t mind. The bunches of flowers were refreshed and glistened like snow. And she smelled one in delight, moistening her lips as though in the dew.

Meanwhile the shower had suddenly caused the stands to fill up. Nana looked through her field glasses. At that distance she could only distinguish a compact, jumbled mass of people, crowding the terraces, their faces showing white against the dark background. At the corners of the grandstand roof the sunlight crept through, flooding the seated crowd from different angles and seeming to take the colour out of the dresses. But Nana particularly enjoyed watching the ladies, who had been sitting in rows of chairs on the gravel below the stands, flee the downpour. As the entrance to the weighing enclosure was strictly forbidden to prostitutes, Nana was making very cutting remarks about these respectable ladies who were rigged out, according to her, like real frights.

A rumour was going round that the Empress was entering the small central stand, a canvas structure in the shape of a chalet whose wide balcony was furnished with red armchairs.

‘Oh, it’s him!’ said Georges. ‘I didn’t think he was on duty this week.’

The long, earnest face of Comte Muffat had appeared behind the Empress. Then the young people joked, saying they were sorry that Satin wasn’t there to go and dig him in the ribs. But through her glasses, Nana had spied the head of the Prince of Scotland in the imperial box.

‘Look, there’s Charles!’ she cried.

She thought he had put on weight. His waist had expanded in the last eighteen months. And she went into details: ah, he was a fine man with a strong physique.

Around her in the ladies’ carriages, they were whispering that the count had left her. It was quite a story. The Tuileries were scandalized by the

conduct of the Chamberlain since he had taken Nana as his mistress. So to hang on to his post, he had just broken off relations with her. La Faloise told this tale without mincing his words, offering himself to her again, calling her his Juliet. But she laughed at him and said:

‘That idiot! You don’t know him. I’ve only got to whistle and he’ll come running.’

For a while she had been studying Sabine and Estelle. Daguenet was still hovering near those ladies. Fauchery, arriving at that moment, had to push past everybody to go and shake hands. And he too was standing by them with a contented expression on his face. Then she continued pointing at the stands with a disdainful gesture:

‘And do you know, I’m just not impressed by those people now. I know them too well. You should see them with their clothes off! No respect then! Respect is finished. Filth below stairs and filth above, it’s always filth wherever you go. That’s why I can’t be bothered with them any more.’

And she made an expansive gesture to indicate everyone, from the grooms who were leading the horses on to the track, to the Empress chatting with Charles. A prince he might be, but a bastard just the same.

‘Bravo, Nana! *Très chic*, Nana!’ La Faloise cried with fervour.

The chimes of a bell faded into the wind, the races continued. They had just run the Prix d’Ispahan and Berlingot, a horse from the Méchain stables, had won. Nana called back Labordette to ask for news of her hundred louis. He started to laugh, refusing to tell her which horses he had backed for her in order not to spoil her luck, he said. Her money had been well placed, she would see in a little while. And when she told him what bets she had placed, ten louis on Lusignan and five on Valerio II, he shrugged, as much as to say that women did silly things whatever happened. She was surprised, she did not understand what he meant.

At that moment, the ground grew still more animated. Lunches were being organized in the open air as they waited for the Grand Prix. Eating and more drinking was taking place everywhere: on the grass, on the high seats of the four-in-hands and the mail coaches, on the victorias, the coupés, the landaus. Displays of cold meat, hampers of champagne, unpacked from cases by the footmen, lay around. Corks popped, their muffled sound carried away by the wind. Jokes were exchanged, the sound of glasses breaking sent a discordant note through the nervous gaiety of the scene.

Gaga and Clarisse were tucking into their food with Blanche, eating sandwiches on a rug which they had spread out over their knees. Louise Violaine who had got down from her jingle, had met up with Caroline Héquet again. On the grass in front of them, some men were setting up a booth and Tatan, Maria, Simonne, and the others had arrived there to have a drink; while nearby, bottles on Léa de Horn's coach were being drained dry, as the gang, bawling and waving their arms about, high above the crowd, were getting more and more drunk in the sunshine. But soon people were crowding mainly round Nana's landau. She stood up and began pouring glasses of champagne for the men greeting her. One of the footmen, François, was passing the bottles while La Faloise, attempting a common accent, kept up a stream of patter.

'Roll up gents… It's free… There's some for everyone!'

'Shush!' Nana said finally. 'We sound like fairground people.'

But she found him very funny. She was enjoying herself hugely. For a moment she thought she would get Georges to take a glass of champagne to Rose Mignon, who was ostentatiously not drinking. Henri and Charles were bored stiff, they'd have loved a glass of champagne. But Georges drank the whole glassful, afraid they would quarrel over it. Then Nana remembered Louiset, standing forgotten behind her. Perhaps he was thirsty? And she forced him to drink a few drops of wine, which made him cough and splutter.

'Roll up gents, roll up!' La Faloise shouted again. 'It's not two sous, it's not one sou… We're *giving* it away.'

But Nana interrupted him with an exclamation.

'Look, Bordenave's over there! Shout to him, oh hurry, do!'

It was indeed Bordenave, strolling around with his hands behind his back, his hat that looked reddish in the sun and a greasy frock coat faded at the seams, a Bordenave gone to seed because of his debts but still in a state of rage with the world, displaying his poverty in front of this beau monde, with the attitude of a man always ready to try his luck again.

'My word, how chic you are!' he exclaimed when Nana held out her hand pleasantly.

Then, after draining a glass of champagne, he said with deep regret:

'Oh, if only I were a woman! But never mind! Do you want to come back to the theatre? I've got an idea. I hire the Gaîté* and we both hit Paris

together. What do you say? You owe me that.’

And he stayed, still grumbling, but nevertheless pleased to see her again. For, he said, the very sight of this damn woman there in front of him warmed the cockles of his heart. She was his little girl, blood of his blood.

The circle was widening. Now La Faloise was pouring the drinks, Philippe and Georges were bringing along more friends. Little by little all the people still on the turf moved across. Nana had a smile or a funny remark for everyone. The groups of drinkers were drawing nearer and drifting across the ground towards her. Soon all you could see was a noisy throng around her landau. And she reigned supreme amongst the proffered glasses with her golden hair streaming out, her snow-white complexion bathed in sunlight. There at the summit, to put down the other women infuriated by her success, she raised her full glass in her old pose of Venus the victorious.

But she felt a touch on her shoulder, and as she turned round she was surprised to see Mignon on the bench. She ducked down a moment and sat beside him for he had just told her something important. Mignon was telling everyone that his wife was silly to bear Nana a grudge; he thought it was stupid and pointless.

‘Listen, my dear,’ he muttered, ‘don’t get Rose too annoyed. I’d rather warn you in advance, you see. Yes, she’s got a weapon she can use against you and as she has never forgiven you about that *La Petite Duchesse* business…’

‘A weapon,’ Nana said. ‘As if I give a damn about that!’

‘Well, listen to me. It’s a letter she must have found in Fauchery’s pocket, a letter written to that snake Fauchery by Comtesse Muffat. And my goodness, it’s plain as daylight, obvious to everybody… So Rose wants to send the letter to the count to take revenge on him and on you.’

‘I don’t give a damn!’ Nana said again. ‘It’s quite funny. So it’s out in the open with Fauchery! Well, good, she was getting on my nerves. We shall have a laugh.’

‘No, no, I don’t want that,’ Mignon replied quickly. ‘That would be a dreadful scandal! And we shan’t get anything out of it.’

He stopped, fearing he had said too much. She exclaimed that of course she wouldn’t come to the rescue of a respectable woman. But as he pressed her again, she gave him a long look. No doubt he was afraid Fauchery

would land up in his own marriage again if he broke it off with the countess. As well as getting her own back, that was what Rose was trying to do, since she had a soft spot for the journalist. And Nana grew thoughtful, remembering Monsieur Venot's visit; a plan was starting to take shape while Mignon was trying to persuade her.

'Let's say that Rose sends the letter, shall we? There is a terrible scandal. You are involved, they say that you are the cause… First the count separates from his wife…'

'Why?' she said. 'On the contrary…'

She broke off in her turn. She didn't need to voice her thoughts. Then she acted as though she was coming round to Mignon's point of view, so as to get rid of him. And when he advised her to go and pay her respects to Rose, perhaps she could go and say hello to her while she was here at the races, in front of everyone, she answered that she would see, she'd think about it.

A sudden commotion made her get to her feet again. On the track some horses were speeding towards the finishing post. It was the Prix de Paris, and Cornemuse was winning. Now the Grand Prix was about to take place, the excitement was mounting; the crowd, whipped up in anticipation, was swaying and stamping in the need to make the time pass more quickly. And in these last few minutes, the punters were alarmed to see the odds constantly shorten for Nana, the outsider from the Vandeuvres stables. Men were coming back all the time with different odds. Nana was at thirty, then twenty-five, then twenty, then fifteen to one. Nobody could understand why. A filly that had been beaten on every racecourse, a filly that not a single punter had wanted to back at fifty to one that very morning! What was the meaning of this crazy behaviour? Some made fun of them, saying that the idiots who were being taken in by this farce would be cleaned out. Others, serious and uneasy, sensed something fishy about the whole affair. Was there perhaps some monkey business going on? They cited things that had happened before and how swindlers at racecourses had got away with it in the past. But this time the famous name of Vandeuvres prevented any more such charges and the sceptics won the argument in the end when they predicted that Nana would come in a resounding last.

'Who's riding Nana?' La Faloise enquired.

At that moment the real Nana reappeared. Then the gentlemen laughed uproariously at the *sous-entendre.* Nana acknowledged them.

‘It’s Price,’ she replied.

And the discussion continued. Price was an English celebrity, unknown in France. Why had Vandeuvres got this jockey to come when it was Gresham who normally rode Nana? Moreover, they were astonished to see him entrust Lusignan to Gresham as the latter never got placed anywhere, according to La Faloise. But all these remarks got swallowed up in the jokes, denials, and extraordinary confusion of disparate opinions. They began emptying bottles of champagne to kill time. Then a whisper went round and groups split up. Vandeuvres had arrived. Nana pretended to be cross with him.

‘Well, this is a nice time to arrive! Here I am, dying to see the weighing enclosure.’

‘Come on then,’ he said. ‘There’s still time. You can have a tour. As it happens, I’ve got a ladies’ ticket.’

And she left on his arm, enjoying the envious looks from Lucy, Caroline, and the others which followed her. Behind her, the Hugon boys and La Faloise, who had remained in the landau, were continuing to dole out her champagne. She shouted to them that she would be back very soon.

But Vandeuvres spied Labordette and called to him. A few brief words were exchanged.

‘Did you pick it all up?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much?’

‘Fifteen hundred louis, bits from everywhere.’

As Nana was all ears, they stopped talking. Vandeuvres was on edge and his nervous, bright eyes flickered in the same way as when he had scared her in the night with his talk of setting himself and his horses on fire. As they crossed the track she lowered her voice and called him ‘tu’.

‘Tell me, explain! Why have the odds on your filly shortened? There’s a great uproar about it!’

He shuddered visibly. He muttered:

‘Oh, so they are talking… What *are* they like, these punters! When I have a favourite, they all rush to back it and there is nothing left for me. Then when an outsider is being backed, they shout and scream as if they were being flayed alive.’

‘Because you should tell me,’ she went on. ‘I placed a bet on her. Any chance she could win?’

He flared up suddenly and unexpectedly.

‘What? Oh, shut up, will you! All the horses have a chance. The odds are shortening because they are betting on her. Who? How should I know? I’m going to leave if you go on pestering me with your silly questions.’

His tone was not characteristic or usual for him. She was surprised rather than offended. Either way he was ashamed of himself, and as she asked him curtly to mind his manners, he apologized. For some time now his temper had been volatile. Everyone was aware in fashionable, worldly Paris that he was playing his last card today. If his horses didn’t win, if they once again failed to bring home the considerable sums that had been bet on them, it would be a disaster, total financial ruin. The edifice of his credit, and his aristocratic veneer, now undermined by riotous living and debt, were collapsing into spectacular ruin. And Nana, they all knew, was the man-eater who had undone him, the last woman to come and clean him out of every penny of his tottering fortune. People talked of her crazy fads and fancies, money just thrown away, one occasion at Baden-Baden where she had not left him enough even to pay the hotel bill, a fistful of diamonds thrown in the fire one drunken night just to see if they burned like coal. Little by little, this working-class girl with her great limbs and her coarse laughter had come to dominate this impoverished and elegant scion of ancient stock. Now he was risking everything, so possessed by his taste for ordures and stupidities, that he had lost even the strength to be cynical. The week before, she had made him promise her a chateau on the coast of Normandy between Le Havre and Trouville. And he would keep his word if it was the last thing he did. But she annoyed him and he felt like hitting her, she was so stupid.

The gatekeeper, who did not dare stop this woman on the count’s arm, had let them go into the weighing enclosure. Swelling with pride at finally entering this forbidden territory, Nana walked deliberately slowly past the ladies sitting at the foot of the stands. On the ten rows of chairs, the bright colours of a dense mass of dresses mingled gaily in the open air. Chairs were drawn up, people meeting made cosy circles, and it looked as if they were sitting under clumps of trees in a public park, with the children running around from one group to another. Higher up, the crowded tiers of seats filled with people, their light-coloured dresses melting into the subtle

shade of the wooden stands. Nana stared hard at the ladies. She made a point of fixing her eyes on Comtesse Sabine in particular. Then, as she passed in front of the Empress's box, she was amused by the sight of Muffat standing near the Empress in his stiff official posture.

'Oh, how stupid he looks!' she said very loudly to Vandeuvres.

She insisted on seeing everything. This end of the park with its long stretches of grass, its clumps of trees, wasn't so much to her taste. An ice seller had set up a large table next to the railings. Beneath a rustic shelter with a thatched roof, a throng of people were gesticulating and shouting. This was the bookmakers' ring. Beside them were empty horseboxes and, to Nana's disappointment, the only horse she saw there belonged to a gendarme. After that came the paddock, a track about a hundred metres in circumference, where a stable boy was leading Valerio II round with his hood on. And that was it! There were a lot of men strolling about on the gravel paths with orange cards in their buttonholes, and a constant coming and going of folk in the open stands, which caught her attention briefly. But really it wasn't worth getting upset if they wouldn't let you in!

Daguenet and Fauchery, who were passing, waved to her. She beckoned to them and they were obliged to come over and listen while she disparaged the weighing enclosure. Then, breaking off:

'Oh, look! How old the Marquis de Chouard looks! He's going downhill. Is he still mad for the women?'

Then Daguenet told her about the last thing the old man had done the day before yesterday that no one knew about yet. After hanging around for some months, he had just bought Gaga's daughter Amélie for thirty thousand francs, or so they were saying.

'The dirty old man!' cried Nana, disgusted. 'Who'd have a daughter! But now I come to think of it, that must be Lili over there with a lady in a coupé on the turf. I thought I recognized that face. The old man must have brought her along.'

Vandeuvres wasn't paying attention, he was impatient to be rid of her. But since Fauchery had said as he left that if she hadn't seen the bookmakers she hadn't seen anything, the count was obliged to take her in spite of his obvious reluctance. And then she was happy. This was indeed a curious sight.

A rotunda opened up between two lawns bordered by young chestnut trees. And there, forming a vast circle in the shade of the pale green, the bookmakers, all crammed together, were waiting for the punters, as though at a fair. In order to see over the crowd, they had hoisted themselves up on to wooden benches and were putting up their odds next to them against the trees. With a watchful eye, they wrote down bets at the wave of a hand or the blink of an eye, so rapidly that the open-mouthed onlookers stared at them uncomprehendingly. It was a chaos of shouted numbers, an uproar as they greeted unexpected changes in the odds. And from time to time, increasing the noise twofold, the runners, stopping at the entrance to the rotunda, came to warn them with a sudden shout that they were off, or that a horse had won, at which a long roar passed through that fever of betting in the sunshine.

‘How funny they are!’ murmured Nana, relishing every minute. ‘They look so cross… Look at that huge man—I wouldn’t like to meet him on my own in a dark forest.’

But Vandeuvres was pointing out a bookmaker, who had once served in a draper’s shop and had earned three million in two years. He was a fair, delicate man, slightly built, treated with respect by those around him. People smiled as they spoke to him and stopped in their cabs to have a look.

They were finally leaving the rotunda when Vandeuvres nodded slightly to another bookmaker, who then ventured to call him over. He was one of his former coachmen, enormous, built like an ox, with a very red complexion. Now that this fellow was trying his luck at the races with funds of doubtful origin, the count was doing his best to encourage him by entrusting him with his secret bets, yet treating him still like a servant from whom you don’t need to hide anything. In spite of Vandeuvres’s protection, this man had lost some very large sums of money in quick succession, and he too was playing his last card that day, his eyes bloodshot, and looking as if he was about to have an apoplectic fit.

‘Well, Maréchal,’ Vandeuvres asked in a low voice. ‘How much have you laid bets for?’

‘Five thousand louis, Monsieur le Comte,’ the bookmaker answered in similar hushed tones. ‘That’s good, isn’t it? I admit I increased the odds, I placed them at three to one.’

Vandeuvres looked annoyed.

‘No, no, I don’t want that, put them back to two to one straight away. That’s my last word, Maréchal.’

‘Oh, now what difference does that make to Monsieur le Comte?’ went on the other man, with a humble conspiratorial smile. ‘I had to attract people in order to place your two thousand louis.’

When he said that, Vandeuvres made him hold his tongue. But as he was going away, Maréchal suddenly remembered something and wished he had asked him about the shortened odds on his filly. He would be in a dreadful mess if the filly stood a chance since he had just taken a bet of two hundred louis at fifty to one.

Nana understood nothing of the count’s whispered conversation, but did not dare ask for further explanations. He seemed more nervous, he swiftly handed her over to Labordette when they met him outside the weighing room.

‘Take her back,’ he said. ‘I’ve got things to do. Goodbye.’

And he went into the room, a narrow room with a low ceiling where a huge pair of scales took up most of the space. It was like a left luggage store in a suburban station. It was another grave disappointment to Nana, because she was thinking it would be enormous, a monumentally large machine for weighing horses. What was this! They were only weighing the jockeys! So why did they need to go to so much trouble with all this weighing! On the scales, a stupid-looking jockey with his harness on his knees was waiting for a stout man in a frock coat to check his weight. A stable boy at the door was holding his horse, Cosinus, around which the crowd had gathered, silent and absorbed.

They were about to close off the track. Labordette was trying to hurry Nana up. But he came back to point out a small man chatting with Vandeuvres a little way away.

‘Look, there’s Price,’ he said.

‘Oh yes, the one who’s riding me,’ she laughed.

She thought he was very ugly. All the jockeys seemed stupid-looking to her. No doubt, she opined, because they were prevented from growing properly. That one, a man of forty, seemed to her like an old, desiccated child; his long thin face was hard and expressionless and deeply furrowed. His body was so skinny and gnarled that his blue jacket with the white sleeves seemed to be wrapped around a piece of wood.

‘You know,’ she said as she left, ‘that man wouldn’t make me happy!’

There was still a crowd on the turf, where the damp, trampled grass was now black. People clustered round the two billboards high up on their cast-iron pillars, and a roar greeted each horse’s number that appeared by telegraph wire from the weighing room. Gentlemen checked their race cards. Pichenette had been withdrawn by her owner and it caused a stir. Nana simply walked straight back on Labordette’s arm. The bell, hanging from the flagstaff, went on and on ringing to warn people to clear the track.

‘Oh, my dears,’ she said as she got back into her landau, ‘what a joke their weighing enclosure is!’

She was greeted and applauded: ‘Bravo Nana! Nana has come back to us!’ How silly they were! Did they think she would let them down? She had come back at just the right time. They were about to start. And the champagne was forgotten, they had stopped drinking.

But Nana was surprised to find Gaga in her carriage with Bijou and Louiset on her lap. Gaga had decided to do that to get near La Faloise, saying she wanted to cuddle Baby. She adored children.

‘By the way, what’s all this about Lili?’ asked Nana. ‘It is her over there in the old man’s coupé, isn’t it? I have just been told something not very nice.’

Gaga adopted a tearful expression.

‘My dear, it has made me ill,’ she got out with some difficulty. ‘Yesterday I had to stay in bed because I was so upset and today I thought I wouldn’t be able to come… Do you know what I really think? I didn’t want to do it. I had sent her to a convent so that she would make a good marriage. And she had the strictest advice and constant surveillance… Well, my dear, she’s the one who wanted it. Oh, there was such a scene, tears, bad language, that I had to give her a good slap. She was so bored, she wanted to go ahead with it. So when she started saying: “Anyway you’ve no right to stop me,” I said to her: “You little wretch, you’ll bring shame on the family, do what you want!” And that’s how it came about. I agreed to fix it up. But there you are, my last hope gone. And I’d dreamed of such good things!’

The noise of people quarrelling made them get to their feet. It was Georges protecting Vandeuvres from the vague rumours circulating in the various groups.

‘Why say he’s dropping his own horse?’ the young man was shouting. ‘Yesterday at the racing salon* he backed Lusignan for a thousand louis.’

‘Yes, I was there,’ Philippe affirmed. ‘And he has not put a single louis on Nana. If Nana is ten to one it’s nothing to do with him. It’s silly to accuse people of plotting like that. What would be the point?’

Labordette was listening quietly. Then, with a shrug:

‘Well leave it, people are bound to talk. The count has just bet at least another five hundred louis on Lusignan and if he has laid another hundred on Nana it’s because an owner must always look as if he has confidence in his own horses.’

‘But dammit, what’s all the fuss about anyway!’ exclaimed La Faloise, waving his arms about. ‘Spirit is the one who’ll win. Down with France! Hurrah for England!’

A thrill went through the crowd as another bell announced the arrival of the horses on the track. Then, in order to get a better view, Nana climbed on to the landau and stood on the seat, trampling the bunches of flowers, the forget-me-nots and the roses, under her feet. Around her stretched the vast horizon. At this last exciting moment she saw first the empty track, closed off with grey barriers, a police guard placed at every other post. The strip of muddy grass in front of her grew greener and greener till it became a soft velvet carpet in the distance. Then in the middle distance when she looked down, she could see the turf swarming with people on tiptoe, clinging on to the carriages, jostling each other in their excitement, with the horses whinnying, the canvas on the tents clacking, the jockeys urging on their animals in the midst of onlookers who ran to lean on the railings, while on the other side when she turned to look at the stands, the faces seemed smaller, the deep masses of heads were just a motley array thronging the paths, the steps and the terraces, where countless black profiles were etched against the sky. And beyond them again, around the racecourse, she had a view over the plain. Behind the ivy-covered windmill on the right were fields, interspersed with dark patches of trees stretching out into the distance. Opposite, as far as the Seine flowing around the hill, the park’s avenues criss-crossed, and lines of stationary carriages waited. Then, towards Boulogne on the left, the landscape opened up again into the blue distances of Meudon, beyond an avenue of paulownias whose naked heads looked like a pool of bright pink lacquer. People were still arriving, an ant-like procession wound its way from that direction on a narrow path across

the fields, while much further off in the direction of Paris, the non-paying public, a herd of folk positioned in the woods, made a line of dark moving dots under the trees on the edge of the Bois.

But suddenly the hundred thousand souls, like insects madly swarming over that part of the plain, sprang into life under the vast sky, as the sun, which had gone in for a quarter of an hour, reappeared, and flooded the world with light. Everything burst into flames again, the ladies' parasols were like golden shields, countless numbers of them above the heads of the crowd. They applauded the sun, greeted it with laughter, stretching up their arms as if to push away the clouds.

Meanwhile an officer of the peace went off on his own in the middle of the deserted track. Higher up on the left, a man appeared with a red flag in his hand.

'It's Baron de Mauriac, the starter,' replied Labordette to a question from Nana.

Around the young woman, amongst the men who were pushing forward right up to the step of her landau, there were exclamations, and a conversation continued, without order, merely as the words were flung up by sudden new impressions. Philippe and Georges, Bordenave and La Faloise could not keep quiet.

'Don't push!… Let me see! Ah, the judge is going into his box… Did you say it was Monsieur de Souvigny? Goodness, you must need good eyesight to tell who's a nose in front from a thing like that! Hush, the banner's going up… Look, here they come! Cosinus is in front.'

A red and yellow banner was flapping in the air at the end of a pole. The horses were arriving one at a time led by grooms with jockeys in the saddle, their arms hanging loose, making splashes of colour in the sunshine. After Cosinus, Hasard and Boum appeared. Spirit was greeted by a murmur of approval; he was a splendid large brown bay with a sort of British melancholy about his sombre yellow and black colours. Valerio II got a round of applause when he entered, small, very lively, in light green with a pink border. The two Vandeuvres horses did not appear straight away but eventually, from behind Frangipane, their blue and white colours could be seen. But Lusignan, a very dark bay of impeccable appearance, was almost passed over in the general surprise caused by Nana. She had not been seen like that before, the sun gilded the chestnut mare with the blond tones of a

redhead. Deep-chested, she shone in the light like a new louis coin, and her head and neck rose lightly from the long, nervous, elegant back.

‘Oh look, she’s got hair like mine!’ cried Nana, delighted. ‘I’m so proud of her!’

They climbed up on to the landau, Bordenave almost stepped on Louiset, forgotten by his mother. He picked him up, making paternal noises, lifting him on to his shoulders and muttering:

‘Poor kid, he must see as well. Wait, I’ll show you Maman, shall I? Look over there, look at the horsey.’

And as Bijou was scratching at his legs, he took charge of him as well, while Nana, very pleased with this animal who bore her name, glanced at the other women to see the expressions on their faces.

They all looked furious. At that moment La Tricon, who had been motionless till then, was waving her hands about, giving orders to a bookmaker above the crowd. Her instinct had spoken, she was backing Nana.

Meanwhile La Faloise was making an intolerable noise. He had taken a fancy to Frangipane.

‘I’m inspired,’ he said again and again. ‘Look how he moves! I’m backing Frangipane at eight to one. Who’s joining me?’

‘Oh, pipe down,’ Labordette said finally. ‘You’ll be sorry.’

‘Frangipane’s a non-starter,’ declared Philippe. ‘He’s already in a sweat. You’ll see when he starts to canter.’

The horses had gone up again on the right-hand side and they set off at a canter for the preliminary trial run, passing by the stands in a straggly line. Then the conversation grew animated once again, they all spoke at once.

‘Lusignan’s too long in the back, but he’s very ready. Don’t put a sou on Valerio II; he’s skittish, he canters with his head up, that’s a bad sign. Look, it’s Burne riding Spirit! He hasn’t got the shoulder for it. Good firm shoulders, that’s the main thing. No, Spirit’s definitely too quiet. Listen, I saw Nana after the Grande Poule des Produits in a lather, with a dull coat and with her breath coming and going like mad. I’ll bet you twenty louis she isn’t placed! Oh, why doesn’t he shut up? He’s getting on our nerves with his Frangipane! Time’s up, they’re off.’

La Faloise, almost in tears, was desperate to find a bookmaker. They had to persuade him against it. All necks were craned. But there was a false

start, the starter whom you could only make out in the distance as a thin black streak, had not lowered his red flag. The horses went back after a short canter. There were two more false starts. Finally, the starter got the horses lined up and set them off with a skill that called forth applause.

‘Splendid!… No, it was just lucky!… No matter, they’re off!’

Their cries abated as their chests tightened with anxious excitement. Now all bets were off, and it was being decided out on the enormous track. At first there was silence as if everyone were holding their breath. Faces were lifted, white and trembling. At the start, Hasard and Cosinus had set the pace, taking the lead. Valerio II was close behind, the others followed in a disorderly bunch. When they thundered past the stands, shaking the ground in a sudden whirlwind, the field was already spread over about forty lengths. Frangipane was last, Nana was a little behind Lusignan and Spirit.

‘My God,’ muttered Labordette. ‘The English horse is going great guns!’

Everyone in the landau had something to say, to exclaim about. They all stood on tiptoe to follow the bright shirts of the jockeys cantering in the sunshine. At the rise Valerio II took the lead, Cosinus and Hasard were losing ground while Lusignan and Spirit, neck and neck, were still ahead of Nana.

‘By God, the Englishman’s got it in the bag, it’s obvious,’ said Bordenave. ‘Lusignan is tiring and Valerio II can’t stand the pace.’

‘Well, it’s a crying shame if the Englishman wins!’ cried Philippe, in an outburst of patriotic grief.

A feeling of anguish was rising in the throats of all these jostling people. Another defeat! And the increasing and extraordinary warmth of their desire for Lusignan was of almost religious proportions, while they hurled abuse at Spirit and his melancholic jockey with the long face. Among the sparse crowd on the grass, a gasp of excitement sent groups of people running hell for leather to the railings. Riders cut the turf in a furious gallop. And Nana, who was slowly looking about her, saw at her feet a sea of heads, a surge of animals and their mounts beaten and, as it were, carried off around the track in the whirlwind of the race and the bright jockeys streaking the horizon like lightning. She watched from behind, saw the cruppers vanishing, legs stretching at speed, becoming as thin as strands of hair. Now at the far end of the course they were sideways-on, very small and delicate against the

distant green of the Bois. Then suddenly they vanished behind a large clump of trees in the middle of the racecourse.

‘Don’t give up!’ cried Georges, ever the optimist. ‘It’s not over yet… They’re gaining ground on the Englishman.’

But La Faloise, again full of scorn for his nation, was scandalizing everyone with his acclaim of Spirit. Bravo! Serve them right! France needed that! Spirit first and Frangipane second! That would teach his fellow countrymen! Labordette, exasperated, seriously threatened to throw him out of the landau.

‘Let’s see how many minutes they take,’ Bordenave said calmly. With Louiset still in his arms, he had pulled out his watch.

One by one from behind the clump of trees, the horses were reappearing. It caused astonishment, there was a long-drawn-out murmur from the crowd. Valerio II was still in the lead, but Spirit was gaining ground and behind him Lusignan had fallen back while another horse was taking his place. At first they didn’t realize what had happened, they mixed up the silks. There were loud exclamations.

‘Hey, it’s Nana! Come on, Nana! I tell you Lusignan hasn’t moved. Yes it *is* Nana! You can see it is, because of the gold… Just look at her! She’s on fire! Bravo Nana! What a little minx!… Oh that doesn’t mean anything. She’s making the running for Lusignan.’

For a few seconds that was the general opinion. Nevertheless, in a sustained effort the mare was slowly but surely gaining ground. Then there was enormous excitement. The horses in the rear were of no interest to anyone. Spirit, Nana, Lusignan, and Valerio II were fighting it out between them. People called their names, and in stammered and disjointed phrases noted their moving forward or falling back. And Nana, who had just climbed up on the coachman’s seat, stood there, uplifted, white-faced, trembling all over, so numb she couldn’t speak. Close by her, Labordette had recovered his smile.

‘The Englishman is struggling, isn’t he!’ Philippe said delightedly. ‘He’s not doing well.’

‘Well, in any case Lusignan is finished,’ La Faloise cried. ‘It’s Valerio II who is coming good. Look! There are the four of them in a bunch.’

The same words were on every tongue.

‘What a pace! One hell of a pace!’

Now the leaders were approaching like a rumble of thunder. You could sense them coming, it was like a breathing, a distant rumbling that got louder by the second. The whole crowd had thrown themselves impetuously at the barriers. And just before the horses reached them, a loud roar issued from their throats, increasing as they got nearer like the crashing of breakers on the shore. It was the brutal finale of a colossal game, a hundred thousand spectators with one single thought, burning with the same racing fever for these animals whose galloping hooves carried millions. People pushed and shoved with their fists in the crush, open-mouthed, each for himself, and everyone whipping on their own horse by shouting and waving. And the cry from every mouth, the cry of wild beasts in frock coats grew ever clearer:

‘Here they come, here they come, here they come!’

Nana was still gaining ground; now Valerio II had fallen back, and she was neck and neck with Spirit, half a length ahead. The thunderous roar got louder. They were arriving, a storm of oaths greeted them from the landau.

‘Get on there, Lusignan, you coward, you filthy nag! Go for it, Englishman! Come on, come on, old chap! Look at Valerio, sickening! Old bag of bones! There go my ten louis! Nana’s the only one in the running! Bravo, Nana! Bravo, you little bitch!’

And up on the seat, Nana had unconsciously begun to swing her hips and thighs as though she herself were the one running the race. She tapped her belly as though that might help the mare along. At each tap she gave a sigh of fatigue, and uttered in a husky voice:

‘Go on… Go on… Go on!’

Then they saw something miraculous. Price, standing up in his stirrups with his crop held high, was whipping on Nana with an arm of iron. That old wizened child, with the hard, leaden expression on his long face, was breathing fire. And in a bold fury, the will triumphant, he was giving his all to the mare, he was holding her up, he was bearing her forward, foaming and with bloodshot eyes. The whole field thundered past, displacing the air, taking your breath away; while the judge waited, impassive, with his eye fixed on the sighting mark. Then an enormous din of applause broke loose. In a final effort, Price had just flung Nana past the post, beating Spirit by a head.

It was like the roar of the rising tide. Nana! Nana! Nana! The cry resounded, increased in volume, with the violence of a tempest, filling the

horizon gradually from the depths of the Bois to Mont Valérien, from the meadows of Longchamp to the plains of Boulogne. On the turf, they were out of their minds with excitement. Long live Nana! Vive la France! Down with England! The women were brandishing their parasols; men were jumping up and turning round and shouting. Others were laughing excitedly and throwing their hats in the air. And on the other side of the track the weighing enclosure responded, the stands were getting agitated, without them being able to see anything very clearly except a trembling in the air like the invisible flame of a brazier above an animated heap of little disjointed figures with waving arms, and black dots for eyes and open mouths. It didn't stop, it swelled, began again at the end of the distant avenues amongst the folk stationed under the trees, and then spread wider still till it reached the excitement of the imperial box where the Empress had been applauding. Nana! Nana! Nana! The cry went up, up in the glorious sunshine whose golden rays beat down on the delirious crowd.

Then Nana, standing up straight on the bench of her landau, thought it must be her they were applauding. She had stayed motionless for a moment, flabbergasted by her triumph, staring at the track invaded by a throng so dense you could no longer see the grass beneath the sea of black hats. Then when everybody had formed two lines right up as far as the exit, to honour Nana once more as the mare left with Price who had collapsed exhausted on to her neck, as if completely spent, she slapped her thighs hard, forgetting everything else and uttered a few coarse words of triumph:

'Oh, my God, it's me! But… Oh, my God, what luck!'

And not knowing how to express the delight overwhelming her, she grabbed hold of Louiset, whom she had just seen on Bordenave's shoulder, and kissed him.

'Three minutes and fourteen seconds,' said Bordenave, putting his watch back in his pocket.

Nana was still listening to her name echoing round the entire plain. It was her public applauding her, while erect in the sunshine she towered above them, golden-haired, in her blue and white dress, the colours of the sky. As Labordette rushed off, he told her she had won two thousand louis, for he had placed his fifty louis on Nana at forty to one. But the money did not mean so much as this unexpected victory whose glory made her queen of all Paris. All the ladies had lost money. Rose Mignon had broken her parasol in rage; and Caroline Héquet and Clarisse and Simonne and Lucy

Stewart herself, despite the presence of her son, were cursing under their breath, exasperated by the luck of this fleshy courtesan. While La Tricon, who had made a sign of the cross when the horses set off and when they arrived, drew herself up to her full height, very pleased that she had obeyed her instinct as a woman of experience in anointing Nana queen.

Around the landau in the meantime, the crush of men was increasing. The group made a tremendous noise. Georges was choked and carried on shouting all by himself in a broken voice. As they had run out of champagne, Philippe, taking the footmen with him, had just run to the drink stalls and back. And Nana's court was growing all the time, her triumph persuaded those who were so far undecided. The movement which had made her carriage the centre of the racecourse was reaching its apotheosis: Queen Venus amidst the folly of her subjects. Behind her, Bordenave was muttering oaths under his breath like a fond father. Steiner himself, again in thrall to her, had deserted Simonne and was hoisting himself up on to one of the carriage steps. When the champagne arrived and she raised her full glass, there was such loud applause, with them all shouting 'Nana! Nana! Nana!', that the astonished crowd looked around for the mare. And no one knew if it was the animal or the woman who had captivated every heart.

Meanwhile Mignon rushed over, despite Rose's black looks. That wretched girl made him lose his head, he wanted to hug her. Then, after kissing her on both cheeks, in a paternal fashion:

'The annoying thing is Rose will definitely send the letter now. She's too angry.'

'I don't care, that suits me down to the ground!' Nana blurted out.

But, seeing how shocked he was, she made haste to correct herself:

'Oh, what am I saying? I really don't know what I'm saying! I'm drunk.'

And she was drunk, in fact, drunk with joy, drunk with the sun, her glass always lifted, she applauded herself.

'To Nana! To Nana!' she cried in the midst of a redoubling of the din, the laughter, the bravos, which had gradually spread over the entire racecourse.

The races were coming to an end, they were running in the Prix Vaublanc. One by one, carriages were leaving. But the name of Vandeuvres came up again and again during the disputes. Now it was obvious: for the last two years Vandeuvres had been planning his coup, instructing Gresham

to hold Nana back, and he had brought Lusignan out merely in the interests of the mare. The losers were cross, while the winners shrugged their shoulders. So what? Was that not allowed? An owner could do what he wanted with his stable, couldn't he? He wasn't the only one by a long chalk. Most of them thought Vandeuvres very smart to have got his friends to persuade people to lay bets on Nana, which explained the sudden drop in the odds. They were talking about two thousand louis at an average of thirty to one, winning twelve thousand francs, a figure whose size inspired respect and excused everything.

But other, very serious, rumours that had started in the weighing enclosure were being whispered. Men coming back from there gave details; voices grew louder and told openly of a terrible scandal. Poor Vandeuvres was finished. He had spoilt his splendid coup by crass stupidity, an idiotic attempt at robbery, telling Maréchal, a crooked bookmaker, to lay two thousand louis against Lusignan winning in order to offset the thousand or so, a paltry sum, that he had publicly bet. And that proved to be the fracture which led to the final disintegration of his fortune. The bookmaker, having been warned that the favourite was not going to win, had realized sixty thousand francs on this horse. However Labordette, lacking any exact and detailed instructions, had gone, as it turned out, to put two hundred louis on Nana, which the bookmaker in his ignorance of the real coup being planned, had continued to offer at fifty to one. Cleaned out of a hundred thousand francs on the mare, and consequently losing forty thousand, Maréchal, who felt everything collapsing around him, had suddenly tumbled to what was going on as he saw Labordette and the count chatting together after the race outside the weighing enclosure. And in his anger the former coachman, with the brutality of a man who has been swindled, had just created a public scandal, telling the whole story, making terrible accusations and stirring up the public. It was also said that the racecourse stewards were going to meet.

Nana, who had been quietly alerted by Philippe and Georges, started thinking aloud as she carried on laughing and drinking. It was possible, after all. She remembered certain things that had been said. Besides, Maréchal looked a horrible man. Yet she was still wondering if it was true when Labordette appeared. He was very pale.

'Well?' she asked in a subdued voice.

'Done for!' he replied simply.

And he shrugged. What a child that Vandeuvres was! She made a gesture of irritation.

That evening at Mabille Nana had colossal success. When she appeared around ten o'clock, the noise was already tremendous. This traditional evening of madness brought together all the fashionable young people of Paris high society wallowing in brutality and stupidity like the lowest of the low. They were all squashed together under festoons of gaslights, in dark suits, extravagant dresses, women with low-cut gowns—old frocks which they did not mind getting dirty— cavorting and bawling, in an orgy of drunkenness. Thirty feet away you couldn't hear the brass band. Nobody was dancing. Stupid remarks did the rounds, who knew why, from one group to the next. People tried hard to be funny, but failed. Seven women shut in the cloakroom were clamouring to be let out. A shallot was found and put up for auction and fetched two louis. And then Nana arrived, still wearing her blue and white racecourse outfit. Amid thunderous applause they presented her with the shallot. She was captured, protesting, and three men carried her in triumph into the garden across the trampled lawn, through the ruined flower beds, and as the orchestra was blocking the way, they stormed through it, breaking the chairs and the music stands. Kindly police officers were organizing the disorder.

It was only on Tuesday that Nana got over the joy of her victory. That morning she was chatting to Madame Lerat, who had come to give her news of Louiset, who had been taken ill after his outing in the fresh air. She was excited by the thing which was the talk of Paris. Vandeuvres, excluded from the racecourses and that same evening expelled from the Cercle Impérial, had burned himself to death the following day in his stables along with his horses.

'He told me he was going to,' repeated the young woman. 'The man was out of his mind! It gave me a real turn when they told me that last night. He could very well have murdered me one evening, you know. But he should have told me about his horse, shouldn't he? At the very least I could have made a lot of money. He said to Labordette that if I knew about it I'd tell my hairdresser straight away and a whole lot of people besides. Nice of him, wasn't it! Oh no, I shan't shed many tears over him.'

When she thought about it she got very angry. At that point Labordette came in. He had settled her bets and was bringing her forty thousand francs. That only served to increase her bad temper because she should by rights

have won a million. Labordette, acting the innocent in the whole affair, washed his hands completely of Vandeuvres. These ancient families had reached rock bottom, and the way they ended was ridiculous.

‘No, no,’ Nana objected, ‘it’s not ridiculous to burn yourself to death in a stable like that. In my opinion he had a courageous end. Oh, you know I’m not defending the business with Maréchal. That was stupid. When I think that Blanche had the cheek to try and put all the blame for that on to me! I replied: “Did I tell him to steal? Don’t you think you can ask for money from a man without pushing him into crime?” If he’d said: “I’ve no money,” I would have said: “All right, let’s go our separate ways.” And that would have been that.’

‘Of course,’ said her aunt solemnly. ‘When men are so pig-headed, they deserve whatever they get.’

‘But as for his final little celebration—oh, that was stupendous!’ Nana continued. ‘Apparently it was terrible, enough to make your flesh creep. He got everyone out of the way and locked himself in with the petrol… And what a blaze! Just think, a whole building like that almost all made of wood and full of straw and hay. The flames went straight up, high into the air. The most magnificent thing was the horses, who did not want to be burnt alive. You could hear them stampeding around and charging at the doors, crying like humans. A lot of people couldn’t get it out of their heads after that.’

Labordette let out a slight breath of disbelief. He had his doubts about Vandeuvres’s death. Someone said they had seen him escape through a window. He had set fire to his stable after suffering a brainstorm. But when it had got too hot it must have brought him to his senses. A man who was so stupid with women, so dissolute, could surely not have had the guts to die in that fashion?

Nana heard him out as he destroyed her illusions. But all she could think of to say was:

‘Poor boy, such a magnificent way to go!’

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CHAPTER 12

AROUND one in the morning, in the big bed draped in Venetian lace, Nana and the count were not yet asleep. He had come back the evening before after sulking for three days. The bedroom, lit by a dim lamp, was slumbering, warm and all moist with the odour of their lovemaking, while the white lacquered furniture inlaid with silver was just a pale blur. The bed was engulfed in shadow from the drawn curtain. There was a sigh, then the sound of a kiss interrupting the silence, and Nana, slipping from under the blankets, sat bare-legged for a moment on the edge of the bed. The count let his head fall back on the pillow and remained in the darkness.

‘Darling, do you believe in God?’ she enquired after reflecting for a moment, her face serious, gripped by religious terror after leaving the arms of her lover.

Ever since that morning, she had complained of not feeling well and all her silly little thoughts, as she called them, thoughts about death and hell, were obsessing her. She sometimes had nights when, with her eyes wide open, she was shaken by childish fears and dreadful nightmarish imaginings. She went on:

‘Well, what do you think? Do you reckon I shall go to heaven?’

And she shuddered, as the count, surprised by these strange questions at such a time as this, felt his Catholic guilt awaken. But with her chemise falling off her shoulders and her hair hanging loose, she threw herself on to his chest sobbing, clutching him.

‘I’m scared of dying… I’m scared of dying…’

It was only by a supreme effort that he managed to disengage himself. He was afraid to give in to the sudden madness of this woman clinging on to his body in her terror of the Invisible, which was contagious. But he reasoned with her, she was in the best of health, she simply had to behave like a sensible girl to deserve forgiveness one day. But she shook her head. Of course she hadn’t harmed anyone; and she even showed him an icon of the Virgin Mary she still wore, hanging on a red thread between her breasts. Only it was a foregone conclusion: women who weren’t married and went with men would go to hell. Bits and pieces of her catechism were coming

back to her. Oh, if only you knew for sure; but there it was, you didn't know, nobody brought back news from the life beyond. And it would definitely be silly to alter the way you behaved if the priests were talking nonsense. Yet she kissed her necklet religiously, all warm from being against her skin, as though it were a charm to ward off Death, the idea of which filled her with icy horror.

She insisted on Muffat accompanying her into the dressing room. She shivered if she had to stay a minute on her own in there, even if she left the door ajar. When he had gone back to bed, she continued to prowl round the room, looking in all the corners and starting at the least little sound. She halted in front of a mirror, forgetting herself like in the old days as she contemplated the spectacle of her nudity. But the sight of her breasts, her hips, and thighs now only increased her terror. Lastly, she felt the bones in her face with both hands for quite some time.

'When you're dead, you're ugly,' she said slowly.

And she drew in her cheeks, opened her eyes wide, and let her jaw drop to see what she would look like. Then, turning to the count with her face in that position:

'See, my head will shrink!'

Then he got cross.

'You're crazy, come back to bed.'

He imagined her in a grave, nothing but bones, lying there for a century. And he clasped his hands together, he stammered out a prayer. For some while now, religion had taken hold of him again. These religious crises he had every day gave him a violent rush of blood to the head, which left him feeling stunned. His finger-joints cracked, he muttered over and over: 'My God, My God, My God!' It was the cry of impotence, the cry of his sin which he was incapable of resisting, despite the certainty of his damnation. When she went over, she found him haggard, with his nails clutching his chest, staring up from under the blanket, as though imploring heaven. And she started to weep, they embraced, teeth chattering without them knowing why, wallowing around in the depths of the same foolish obsession. They had already spent one night like that. Only this time it was completely stupid, as Nana declared, when she was no longer afraid. A lingering suspicion made her cautiously question the count: had Rose Mignon

perhaps sent the famous letter? But it wasn’t that, it was nothing more than panic, for he was still unaware of being cuckolded.

Two days later after vanishing again, Muffat appeared in the course of the morning at a time he never normally came. He was grey in the face, his eyes were red, and he seemed all shaken still from some enormous struggle within himself. But Zoë, who was herself in a fright, did not see how distressed he was. She ran to meet him, crying:

‘Oh, Monsieur, come quick! Madame almost died last night.’

And when he asked her for details:

‘Something you wouldn’t believe… She has miscarried, Monsieur.’

Nana had been three months’ pregnant. She’d been thinking for some while that there was something wrong; Doctor Boutarel himself was unsure. Then when he gave his definite diagnosis, she felt so annoyed that she did everything in her power to hide her pregnancy. Her nervous fears, her black moods, were the result partly of this affair, which she kept secret, ashamed as though she was an unmarried mother obliged to hide her condition. It seemed a ridiculous accident, something which diminished her, and she felt that everyone would make fun of her because of it. What a bad joke! What rotten luck! She must have got caught just when she thought all that was over and done with. And she seemed constantly surprised, as if her sex had let her down. So you could make babies, even when you didn’t want to anymore and used it for other purposes? Nature exasperated her, this serious business of motherhood rearing its head in the middle of her sexual pleasure, this new life given in the midst of all the death she seemed to be disseminating around her. Ought you not to be able to take control of your own body if you wanted to, without all the fuss and bother? So how had this brat come about? She really couldn’t say. Oh God! The man who had caused it would have done well to keep it to himself, for nobody wanted it, it would be in everybody’s way, and it certainly wouldn’t have a very happy life.

Meanwhile Zoë recounted the catastrophe.

‘Madame was taken bad with the colic at four o’clock. When I went into the dressing room after I didn’t see her come out, I found her lying unconscious on the floor. Yes, Monsieur, on the floor in a pool of blood, just as if she’d been murdered! So then I realized what had happened, you see. I was furious, Madame could have confided in me about her condition. But

just then as it happened, Monsieur Georges arrived. He helped me lift her up and as soon as I said the word ‘miscarriage’, he felt really awful too. To tell you the truth, I’ve been angry ever since yesterday!’

And it was true, the house seemed as if it was in great disarray. All the servants were running up and down the stairs and through the rooms. Georges had spent the night in an armchair in the salon. It was he who had told Madame’s friends in the evening, the time when Madame was usually at home to visitors. He was pale, in a state of shocked excitement he told them what had happened. Steiner, La Faloise, Philippe, and others had arrived. As soon as they heard the first few words, they were horrified: Impossible! It must be a bad joke! Then they grew serious, looked at the bedroom door with a concerned air, shaking their heads with worried expressions on their faces. Until midnight, a dozen gentlemen chatted in low voices by the fire, all of them friends and all afraid they might be the father. Very embarrassed, they looked as if they were apologizing to one another for being clumsy idiots. Then they reasserted themselves, it was not their business anyway, but hers, wasn’t it? Oh, that Nana! You would never have thought she’d be so stupid, would you! And they all tiptoed off one by one, respectfully, as if from the bedroom of a dead person where it would have been unseemly to laugh.

‘Go up anyway, Monsieur,’ Zoë said to Muffat. ‘Madame is a lot better and you can go and see her… We are expecting the doctor, he promised to come back this morning.’

The maidservant had persuaded Georges to go back to his house to sleep. Upstairs in the salon Satin was alone, lying on a sofa smoking a cigarette, gazing up at the ceiling. In the midst of the general shock of the whole house after the accident, she was icily furious, shrugged her shoulders a great deal, and made disagreeable remarks. Then when Zoë went past, saying to Monsieur that Madame had had a very bad time, she uttered curtly:

‘Serves her right, that’ll teach her!’

They turned round, surprised. Satin hadn’t stirred. Her eyes were still on the ceiling her cigarette nervously pressed between her lips.

‘Well, that’s a nice thing to say, I’m sure!’ Zoë said.

But Satin sat up, threw a furious look at the count, and spat out the same sentence in his face:

‘Serve her right, that’ll teach her!’

And she lay back again, blew out a thin line of smoke as if to indicate that she had nothing at all to do with it and had decided not to intervene. No, it was all too stupid!

But Zoë had just ushered Muffat into the bedroom. The smell of ether still hung there in the stuffy silence scarcely broken by the muffled sound of occasional carriages driving along the Avenue de Villiers. Very pale on the pillow, Nana was awake and thinking, her eyes wide open. She smiled, not turning her head, on seeing the count.

‘Oh, my pet,’ she murmured lazily, ‘I thought I’d never see you again.’

Then when he bent down to kiss her hair she became emotional, she spoke of the baby quite openly as if he were the father.

‘I didn’t dare tell you… I was so happy! Oh, I was thinking all sorts, that he would be a worthy son for you. And now—nothing… Well, perhaps it’s for the best. I don’t want to cause you any embarrassment.’

Astonished at this unexpected paternity, Muffat managed a few incoherent words. He had taken a chair and was sitting down by the bed with one arm on the coverlet. Then the young woman noticed his distraught expression, bloodshot eyes, and trembling lips.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked. ‘Are you poorly as well?’

‘No,’ he answered with difficulty.

She contemplated him in solemn silence. Then with a wave she dismissed Zoë, who was loitering, tidying the medicine bottles. And when they were alone she drew him to her, saying:

‘What’s the matter, darling? Your eyes are brimming with tears, I can tell. Come on, talk to me, you came to tell me something.’

‘No, no, I swear,’ he stammered. But, half choking in anguish and still upset by this sick room he had stumbled on without warning, he started weeping, hiding his face in the bedsheets to muffle this outburst of grief. Nana had realized. Of course, Rose Mignon had decided to send the letter. She let him cry for a moment with such violent convulsions that she felt the bed shake. Then she said in accents of maternal compassion:

‘Has it been difficult at home?’

He nodded. She paused again, then in a very low voice:

‘So… You know everything?’

He nodded. And silence fell, a heavy silence in the melancholy room. It was the day before, as he got back from an evening at the Empress's, that he had received the letter written by Sabine to her lover. After a dreadful night spent dreaming of vengeance he had gone out in the morning, resisting the urge to kill his wife. Out in the fresh air, the beautiful June morning had so affected him, he had been distracted from his thoughts and had come to see Nana as he did at all the worst times in his life. Only then did he indulge his misery in the craven wish to be consoled.

'Come on now, calm down,' went on the young woman, trying to comfort him. 'I've known about it for ages. But of course, I wouldn't have said anything to you. Do you remember last year that you suspected something? Then, thanks to my prudence, things sorted themselves out. Anyway, you didn't have proof. Goodness, if you have proof now, that's hard and I understand. All the same you have to make the best of it. You are not dishonoured by it.'

He had stopped crying. Although for a long time now he had slipped into the most intimate confidences about his domestic life, a sense of shame held him back. She had to encourage him to talk. Look, she was a woman, he could tell her anything. But he said in a subdued voice:

'You are ill. It's not going to help if I tire you out! I am silly to have come, I must leave.'

'No, no,' she said quickly. 'Stay here. I may be able to give you some advice. Only don't make me talk too much, the doctor forbade it.'

He had finally got to his feet and was walking back and forth. Then she questioned him.

'What will you do now?'

'I'm going to call him out, dammit.'

She pursed her lips in disapproval.

'That's not a good idea. What about your wife?'

'I shall take it to court. I have evidence.'

'That's not at all clever, my dear. It's stupid, even. I'll never let you do that, you know.'

And calmly, in a feeble voice, she pointed out the useless scandal a duel and a trial would cause. He'd be the laughing stock of the newspapers for a week. He would be gambling with his whole life, his peace of mind, his

high office at court, the honour of his name. And for what? To have the world make fun of him?

‘What does that matter?’ he cried. ‘I shall have had my revenge.’

‘My pet,’ she said, ‘in situations like this if you don’t take immediate revenge, you never will.’

He stopped, managed a few incoherent words. Of course, he was no coward; but he could sense she was right. An uneasy feeling was growing within him, he felt diminished and ashamed, and this had just lessened his anger and deflated his passion. And in addition, determined to speak her mind, she then dealt him another blow.

‘And would you like to know what is really upsetting you? It is that you yourself are deceiving your wife, aren’t you? You are not sleeping away from home for nothing, are you? Your wife must be suspicious. So what can you blame her for? She will reply that you have led the way by example, and that will keep your mouth shut. And that’s why, my love, you are here walking up and down my room instead of over there murdering the pair of them.’

Muffat had sat abruptly down on his chair again, crushed by her plain speaking. She stopped talking to draw breath; then, in a weak voice:

‘Oh, I’m exhausted. Help me sit up a bit, will you? I keep slipping down, my head’s too low.’

When he had helped her, she heaved a sigh, feeling better. And she reverted to the subject of a court case about separation. Couldn’t he just see the countess’s lawyer entertaining the whole of Paris when he talked about Nana? Every detail would be gone through, her flop at the Variétés, her house, her life. Oh no, she didn’t want all that publicity! Some dirty bitches might have encouraged him to proceed just to make him a laughing stock; but she wanted his happiness above all else. She had drawn him close, and was holding him now with his head on the edge of the pillow, next to hers, one arm under his neck. And she was whispering:

‘Listen, my pet, you have to make it up with your wife.’

His objection was fierce. Never! He could not bear the thought, it was too shameful. However, she insisted, lovingly.

‘You must make it up with her… Look, you don’t want everybody to say I’ve ruined your marriage, do you? That would give me a terrible

reputation, what would people think of me? Only swear you will love me for ever, because if you take up with somebody else…'

Tears were choking her. He stifled her words with kisses, saying again and again:

'You crazy girl, that's impossible!'

'Yes, yes,' she went on. 'I'll try to bear it. After all, she is your wife. It's not as if you were being unfaithful to me with the first woman to come along.'

And she went on in that vein, giving him her best advice. She even talked of God. It was like listening to Monsieur Venot when the old man was preaching at him to wrench him away from his sin. But she wasn't saying they should break off their liaison. She was advocating tolerance, an easy sharing between his wife and his mistress, a life of peace and quiet which wouldn't upset anyone, something that would be a blessed repose amidst the inevitable horrors of life. Their routine wouldn't alter, he would remain her little pet, only he would come a little less often and would spend the nights he didn't spend with her with his wife, the countess. She was at the end of her strength, she finished, with a little sigh:

'Anyway, I shall know I've done some good… And you'll love me even more.'

Silence reigned. She had closed her eyes, and lay on the pillow looking pale again. Now he was listening to her, on the pretext that he didn't want to tire her. After a full minute, she opened her eyes and murmured:

'What about the money, by the way? Where will you get any money if you quarrel with her? Labordette came yesterday about the bill. I haven't a sou. I've nothing to wear.'

Then, with her eyes closed again, she looked like a corpse. A shadow had passed over Muffat's anguished face. In all the trouble which had befallen him since yesterday he had forgotten his money troubles, which he didn't know how to solve. In spite of solemn assurances, the promissory note of a hundred thousand francs, renewed once already, had just been cashed. And Labordette, pretending to be in despair about it, put the whole blame on to Francis, saying that never again would he compromise himself in business dealings with an uneducated man. The count had to honour it, never would he allow a bill he had signed to be protested. Then apart from Nana's new demands, there was now an extraordinary squandering of

money in his household. When the countess returned from Les Fondettes, she had suddenly developed expensive tastes, an appetite for worldly pleasures which simply ate up their fortune. People began to talk of her ruinous caprices, the utter transformation of her existence; five hundred thousand francs squandered on the redecoration of the old house in the Rue Miromesnil, along with excessive sums spent on clothes and vast sums of money vanished into thin air, or perhaps given away without her bothering to account for them. Muffat had allowed himself to make remarks about this once or twice, wanting to find out what had happened to the money. But she had just smiled at him in such a peculiar way that he no longer dared to ask her, afraid of the answer. If he accepted Daguenet for a son-in-law as a gift from Nana, it was above all with the idea of reducing Estelle's dowry to two hundred thousand francs, and of then being free to come to an arrangement with the young man who was still delighted about this marriage he had not dared count on.

However, for the last week, in the immediate need to find a hundred thousand francs for Labordette, Muffat had thought of only one expedient, from which he recoiled. It was to sell Les Bordes, a splendid property valued at half a million, that had just been left to the countess by an uncle; only it was necessary to get her signature, and she herself, by virtue of her contract, could not get rid of the property without his authorization. The day before, he had decided to discuss this with his wife. But now everything was falling apart, never would he accept such a compromise. This thought made the awful blow of her adultery even worse. He knew very well what Nana was asking him to do. For in the increasing lack of restraint which pushed him into sharing everything with her, he had complained of his situation, confided in her his anxiety about the countess's signature.

Yet Nana did not appear to be insisting. She did not open her eyes again. Seeing her so pale, he was afraid. He gave her a little ether. And she sighed, asked him questions, without mentioning Daguenet by name.

'When are they getting married?'

'They are signing the contract on Tuesday, in five days' time,' he answered.

Then, with still-closed eyelids, as though she was speaking from the dark recesses of her consciousness:

'Well, my pet, look and see what you need to do… I want everyone to be happy.'

He soothed her, taking one of her hands. Yes, they would see, the main thing was that she must rest. And he was no longer angry, this sickroom slumbering in a warm ether-filled cosiness had succeeded in making him drowsy, needing only some blessed peace. All his virility, enraged by insult, had disappeared in the warmth of this bed next to this poor woman whom he was taking care of, excited by her fever and the memory of their lovemaking. He leaned over her, clasped her in his arms, while she, impassive, wore on her lips a thin smile of triumph. But then Doctor Boutarel arrived.

‘Well, and how is our little girl doing today?’ he asked Muffat, treating him like the husband, with his best bedside manner. ‘Dear me! I see she has been talking!’

The doctor was good-looking and still quite young, with an enviable clientele among society people. He was very jolly, having a friendly joke with the ladies, but never going further than that; he made sure he was paid a great deal and promptly, but he put himself out at the slightest request for help. Nana sent for him two or three times a week, always fearful at the idea she was going to die, anxiously confiding in him her childish ailments, which he cured by telling her all the gossip and funny anecdotes. All the ladies adored him. But this time it was serious.

Muffat went away very upset. All he felt was love at seeing his poor Nana so weak. As he was leaving, she beckoned to him again, held out her forehead, and in a low, mock-threatening voice, said:

‘You know what’s allowed! Go back to your wife, or I shall be cross—and that’s flat!’

Comtesse Sabine had wanted the contract for her daughter to be signed on a Tuesday, to celebrate her newly restored house where the paint was scarcely dry. Five hundred invitations were sent out, to quite a variety of social milieus. On the morning itself the decorators were still putting up the wall hangings; and when the chandeliers were being lit at around nine o’clock, the architect, accompanied by the excited countess, was still giving them his final orders.

It was one of those warm, delightful spring soirées. The warm June evenings had made it possible to open the two doors of the big salon and extend the dancing out on to the sandy garden paths. When the first guests arrived, welcomed at the door by the count and countess, they were dazzled by what they saw. They recalled the salon of former times and the icy

Comtesse Muffat, the ancient room with its atmosphere of religious solemnity, its massive mahogany furniture in Empire style, its hangings of yellow velvet, its greenish damp-stained ceiling. Now, from the entrance into the vestibule, mosaics picked out in gold glittered under the tall candelabra, and elegant carvings adorned the balustrade of the marble staircase. The salon was resplendent, draped in Genoese velvet, and the ceiling was decorated with an enormous Boucher* for which the architect had paid a hundred thousand francs at the auction of the Château de Dampierre. The chandeliers and crystal sconces lit up a rich plethora of mirrors and fine furniture. You would have said that Sabine's chaise longue, the only seat upholstered in red silk, whose soft luxury had looked so out of place there in the old days, had burgeoned, expanded until it filled the whole house with a lazy voluptuousness, an acute sensual pleasure which burned with all the fierceness of long-awaited fires.

They were already dancing. The band, set up in the garden outside one of the open windows, was playing a waltz whose easy rhythm wafted away gently in the night air. And the garden was enlarged in transparent shadow lit by Chinese lanterns with a crimson marquee in which there was a table with refreshments out on the edge of the lawn. The waltz, which was in fact the frivolous little tune from *La Blonde Vénus*, a cheeky vulgarity, floated into the old house and seemed to make the walls vibrate with warmth. It was as though the pleasures of the flesh had blown in off the street, sweeping away a whole dead era from that noble house, carrying away the Muffats' past, a century of honour and faith slumbering beneath its roof.

Meanwhile by the fireside, in their habitual corner, the old friends of the count's mother had taken refuge, feeling out of place, somewhat dazed. They formed a small group in the middle of the throng of guests gradually arriving. Madame du Joncquoy, not recognizing the rooms any more, had come through the dining room. Madame Chantereau was looking amazed at the garden which seemed immense to her. Before long, low voices making all kinds of cutting remarks, could be heard from this quarter.

'Gracious me,' muttered Madame Chantereau, 'if the countess was alive, can you imagine her arriving in the midst of this crowd? All the gold and the noise… It's scandalous!'

'Sabine is quite mad,' Madame du Joncquoy replied. 'Did you notice her when we came in? Look, you can see her from here. She's dripping with diamonds.'

They got up from their chairs to have a look at the countess and the count from a distance. Sabine, in a white creation embroidered with marvellous English petit point, was triumphant in her beauty, young, happy, with a touch of intoxication in her unwavering smile. Next to her, Muffat, who looked older, a little pale, was also smiling in his calm and dignified manner.

‘And to think he was once master here,’ went on Madame Chantereau, ‘and that not one small footstool would have been allowed in the house without his permission! Oh well, she has changed all that, he is in *her* house now… Do you remember the days when she did not want to redecorate her salon? Well now she has redone the whole house.’

But they fell silent. Madame de Chezelles had arrived with a group of young men in her wake, exclaiming delightedly, admiring the house and uttering little cries.

‘Oh! Delightful! Exquisite! How stylish!’

And from across the room:

‘What did I say! There’s nothing to match these old residences when they are done up… They look so smart! Don’t they? Absolutely *grand siècle*!* At last she can entertain in style.’

The two old ladies had sat down again, lowering their voices, chatting about the wedding, which many found astonishing. Estelle, thin and flat-chested, had just gone by in a pink silk dress, with the same dumb virginal expression on her face. She had accepted Daguenet without fuss. She did not evince joy or misery, she was as pale and unemotional as on those bygone winter evenings when she put logs on the fire. All these celebrations put on for her benefit—the lights, flowers, music—left her cold.

‘An adventurer,’ Madame du Joncquoy was saying. ‘I’ve never come across him before.’

‘Careful, he’s coming,’ muttered Madame de Chantereau.

Daguenet, who had caught sight of Madame Hugon and her sons, had hurried over to offer her his arm. And he was laughing, effusively affectionate towards her as though she’d had a hand in his good fortune.

‘Thank you,’ she said, sitting down by the fire. ‘This is my old place, as you see.’

‘Do you know him?’ asked Madame du Joncquoy, when Daguenet had gone.

‘Yes, of course, a charming young man. Georges likes him a lot. From one of the very best families, you know.’

And the good lady defended him against all the unspoken hostility she felt around her. His father, whom Louis-Philippe had thought highly of, had held a prefecture until his death. He himself had perhaps sown a few wild oats. They said he had no money. But in any case, one of his uncles who was a big landowner was to leave him his fortune. The ladies shook their heads while Madame Hugon, herself somewhat embarrassed, kept returning to the noble character of his family. She was very tired, she complained about her legs. For the last month she had been living in her house in the Rue de Richelieu, to deal with a load of business matters, she claimed. There was a tinge of sadness in her motherly smile.

‘All the same,’ Madame Chantereau concluded. ‘Estelle could have done much better for herself.’

There was a fanfare. A quadrille was about to begin. Everyone moved over to the two sides of the salon to leave space in the middle. Brightly coloured gowns drifted past, interspersed with darker dress suits, while jewels sparkled in the bright light, plumes of white feathers quivered, and lilac and roses flowered on the sea of heads. It was already hot, a penetrating perfume arose from the light tulle gowns, from these silk and satin confections where bare shoulders grew whiter as the band played briskly on. Through the open doors, at the back of the other rooms, you could see rows of women sitting and smiling politely, eyes gleaming, mouths pouting, and fans fluttering. And still guests were arriving, a footman announced the names while in the midst of the groups, gentlemen laboriously tried to find room for the ladies hanging on their arms, standing on tiptoe from way off to see if they could spot a free chair. But the house was filling up, skirts brushed against skirts, and in some places a mass of lace, bows, and bustles blocked the way, though everybody remained resignedly polite and gracious, used to these huge dazzling crowds. Meanwhile at the bottom of the garden, beneath the rosy light of the Chinese lanterns, couples escaped the stuffiness of the grand salon and disappeared into the night; shadows of dresses passed by on the edge of the lawn as though keeping time to the music of the quadrille which sounded sweet in the distance behind the trees.

Steiner had just bumped into Foucarmont and La Faloise, drinking a glass of champagne in front of the buffet. ‘It’s so terribly chic,’ said La

Faloise, contemplating the crimson marquee supported by gold lances. ‘You would think you were at the gingerbread fair, wouldn’t you? That’s what it’s like, the gingerbread fair!’

He was permanently ironic these days, adopting the image of the young man who has seen and done everything and hasn’t found anything worthy of being taken seriously.

‘Poor Vandeuvres would be surprised if he were to come back,’ muttered Foucarmont. ‘Do you remember when he was dying of boredom over there by the fireside? My God, one shouldn’t laugh though!’

‘Oh, Vandeuvres was a hopeless case, don’t bother about him!’ La Faloise said scornfully. ‘If he thinks he has impressed us with his roasting, he’s grossly mistaken! Nobody even mentions it any more. Vandeuvres is finished, dead and buried. Let’s talk about someone else!’

Then, as Steiner was shaking his hand:

‘Nana has just arrived, look. Oh, my word, what an entrance! Superb! First she kissed the countess, then when the children came over she blessed them and said to Daguenet: “Listen, Paul, if you are unfaithful to her you’ll have me to answer to…” Oh, did you miss that? How witty, how brilliant!’

The other two listened, open-mouthed. Then they began to laugh. He was delighted, extremely pleased with himself.

‘Ha! You thought that’s what happened? Well it *was* Nana who arranged the wedding. Anyway she’s one of the family.’

The Hugon boys were just going by, Philippe told him to be quiet. Then they talked about the wedding amongst themselves. Georges got cross with La Faloise who recounted the whole tale. It was true that Nana had fixed up one of her old lovers as a son-in-law for Muffat. But it was false that the night before, she had slept with Daguenet. Foucarmont permitted himself a shrug. Did one ever know when Nana was sleeping with somebody? But Georges angrily answered with a ‘Well—I know, Monsieur!’ Which created much hilarity. All the same, as Steiner remarked, it was a fine kettle of fish.

Gradually the marquee filled up. They gave way to others but their group remained together. La Faloise eyed the women brazenly as though he thought he was at Mabille. The little band of friends were surprised to see Monsieur Venot at the end of an avenue in deep conversation with Daguenet. And they made flippant jokes about it: he was giving him confession, or else some advice for the wedding night. Then they came back

to stand outside one of the doors of the salon where couples were galumphing round in a polka, ploughing through the men still not dancing. In the puffs of wind from outside, the candle flames were leaping high in the air. When a dress swished past to the light beat of the music, the fierce heat emanating from the chandeliers was cooled by the draught.

‘By God, they are not cold in there,’ murmured La Faloise.

Coming in from the mysterious shadowy garden, they found themselves blinking. And they pointed out the Marquis de Chouard who was on his own, towering above the naked shoulders surrounding him. His face was pale, very solemn, looking dignified but disdainful under his crown of vanishing white hairs. Scandalized by Comte Muffat’s conduct, he had just broken off relations with him, saying he would not set foot any more in the house. If he had agreed to come this evening it was because of the entreaties of his granddaughter, whose wedding he disapproved of, in any case, and he inveighed against the disintegration of the ruling classes by the shameful compromises of modern immorality.

‘Oh, it’s the limit,’ said Madame du Joncquoy in Madame Chantereau’s ear. ‘This woman has bewitched the poor wretch. And to think he used to be so devout, so noble!’

‘Apparently he is ruining himself,’ said Madame Chantereau. ‘My husband had a bill of his in his hands… He lives in that house in the Avenue de Villiers nowadays. The whole of Paris is talking about it. Goodness me! I don’t say that excuses Sabine, but you have to admit he gives her plenty of reasons to complain, and what if she does throw money away…’

‘It’s not just money she’s throwing away,’ the other woman interrupted. ‘Well, the pair of them are going the same way, so they’ll get there faster, drowning in the swamp, my dear…’

But a soft voice broke in. It was Monsieur Venot. He had come to sit down behind them as though he wanted to hide from view. And leaning over, he said:

‘Why despair? God shows His face when all seems lost.’

His was an untroubled presence in the collapse of this house over which he had once had authority. Since his stay in Les Fondettes he had allowed the folly to increase, all too conscious of his inability to do anything about it. He had tolerated everything—the mad passion of the count for Nana, Fauchery’s closeness to the countess, even Estelle and Daguenet’s marriage.

What did those things matter? And he became more wily and more mysterious as he nourished the thought of wielding his influence over the young couple as well as over the older one, well aware that great depravity may lead to great piety. Providence would have its hour!

‘Our friend,’ he continued in a low voice, ‘is still full of the best religious feelings. He has given me the loveliest proof of that.’

‘Well,’ said Madame du Joncquoy, ‘he should first make it up with his wife.’

‘Of course. In fact I have hopes that this reconciliation will not be slow in coming.’

Then the two old ladies plied him with questions. But he became very humble again, one had to let heaven decide. His whole aim in effecting a reunion between the count and countess was to avoid a public scandal. Religion tolerated many weaknesses when one observed the proprieties.

‘Well,’ said Madame du Joncquoy, ‘you should have prevented the marriage with that adventurer.’

The little old man assumed an expression of profound astonishment.

‘You are wrong. Monsieur Daguenet is a young man of the greatest merit. I am privy to his thoughts. He wants to bid farewell to the mistakes of his youth. Estelle will bring him back into the fold, you can be sure.’

‘Oh, Estelle!’ murmured Madame Chantereau, scornfully. ‘I think the dear girl incapable of the least effort of will. She is a nonentity.’

This opinion made Monsieur Venot smile. But he did not elaborate further on the subject of the young bride. Closing his eyes, as though to express his indifference, he settled down again behind the ladies’ skirts in his little corner. Madame Hugon, fatigued and abstracted, had overheard a few words. She intervened, concluding in her tolerant manner and addressing herself to the Marquis de Chouard, who acknowledged her:

‘These ladies are so critical. Life is so hard for everyone… Is that not so, my friend, one has to forgive others for much if one wants to be worthy of forgiveness oneself?’

The marquis was embarrassed for a few minutes, fearing some innuendo. But the good lady had such a sad smile on her face, that he recovered his equilibrium, saying:

‘No, there can be no forgiveness for some faults… It’s through such tolerance that a society goes to perdition.’

The ball had grown more lively again. A new quadrille was making the floor of the salon vibrate, as if the old house was giving way under the violence of the celebrations. The occasional face of a woman, carried away in the dance, eyes shining, lips half open, with the glow of the chandeliers on her white skin, stood out amongst the myriad white heads. Madame du Joncquoy declared they were mad. It was folly to pack five hundred people in an apartment that could scarcely hold two hundred. You might as well sign the marriage contract in the Place du Carrousel. It was all down to modern manners, said Madame Chantereau; in the old days serious events like this took place in the family, but today you had to have crowds of people from here, there, and everywhere, squashed in together, or the soirée would be deemed to lack spirit. People showed off their wealth, and entertained the scum of Paris society in their houses. And it was no wonder such promiscuity infected the home after that. The ladies complained they could recognize no more than fifty people. Where had all these people come from? Young girls with low necklines exposed their shoulders. One woman had a gold dagger planted in her chignon, while an embroidered bodice of jet pearls covered her in what looked like chain mail. As another woman went past, your eyes followed her with an amused smile because of the outrageous brazenness of her figure-hugging skirts. At this end of the winter season all luxury was displayed in a permissive society comprising whatever the mistress of the house managed to assemble from her chance acquaintances, a society where great names rubbed shoulders with great disgraces in their common appetite for pleasure. The heat increased, the rhythmic symmetry of the quadrille's figures was played out in the midst of overflowing salons.

'The countess is very chic!' La Faloise remarked, at the door to the garden. 'She looks ten years younger than her daughter. By the way, Foucarmont, tell us: Vandeuvres was betting she had no bottom to speak of.'

This cynical pose annoyed the gentlemen. Foucarmont simply replied:

'Ask your cousin, my dear man. Actually, here he comes.'

'That's a good idea,' cried La Faloise. 'I bet you ten louis she has a bottom!'

Fauchery was in fact arriving just then. As an habitué of the house he had walked round via the dining room to avoid the crush in the doorway. Rose having taken him back again at the beginning of the winter, he was

now apathetically sharing himself between the singer and the countess, not at all sure how to give up either. Sabine flattered his vanity but he took more pleasure with Rose. On Rose's side, moreover, it was true passion, a conjugal, faithful love which was the despair of Mignon.

'I say, tell us something,' La Faloise repeated, pumping his cousin's arm. 'Do you see that woman in white silk over there?'

Ever since his inheritance had caused him to adopt a tone of insolent self-confidence, La Faloise made a point of teasing Fauchery, having a grudge against him, wanting to pay him back for his mockery in the old days when he had just come up from the provinces.

'Yes, that lady with the lace.'

The journalist stood on tiptoe, not yet tumbling to what he meant.

'The countess,' he said eventually.

'Exactly my good man. I've bet ten louis. Has she got a bottom?'

And he began to laugh, delighted to have got one over this fellow who had impressed him so much in the old days, when he asked him if the countess wasn't sleeping with anybody. But Fauchery, not in the least shocked, stared back at him.

'Imbecile!' he muttered, with a shrug.

Then he exchanged handshakes with the other gentlemen, while La Faloise, crestfallen, was no longer quite so sure he had said anything witty. They went on chatting to one another. Ever since the races, the banker and Foucarmont were included in the little set in the Avenue de Villiers. Nana was feeling a lot better, the count came every evening to ask how she was. Fauchery, however, who was listening, seemed preoccupied. That morning, during a quarrel, Rose had candidly admitted sending the letter. Oh, for certain, he would meet with a good reception at his fine lady's house! After hesitating for some time, he had come, bravely. But La Faloise's foolish teasing had upset him despite his apparent indifference.

'What's the matter?' Philippe asked. 'You don't look well.'

'Oh no, on the contrary. I've been working, that's why I arrived so late.'

Then coolly, making one of those heroic efforts that go unacknowledged but which may help to resolve the common tragedies in life:

'But I haven't greeted the master and mistress of the house. I must go and pay my respects.'

He even went so far as to joke, turning to La Faloise:

‘Mustn’t I, you idiot?’

And he made his way through the throng. The loud voice of the footman was no longer calling out names, but the count and countess were still chatting by the door, in conversation with the ladies who were coming in. Finally he reached them; the men, who had remained on the steps to the garden, peered over people’s heads to watch what happened. Nana must have been gossiping.

‘The count hasn’t noticed him,’ muttered Georges. ‘Ah, just a minute! He’s turning round. There, now he has.’

The band had just started playing the waltz from *La Blonde Vénus* again. First Fauchery had greeted the countess, who was still smiling, delighted and serene. Then he remained there a moment, behind the count’s back, patiently waiting his turn. This evening the count had his official face on, one of lofty gravity, befitting his worthiness. When he eventually let his eyes fall upon the journalist, his lordly attitude grew even more pronounced. For a second or two the two men looked at each other. And it was Fauchery who was the first to extend his hand. Muffat gave him his. They clasped hands. In front of them Comtesse Sabine was smiling, her eyelids lowered, while the unceasing strains of the waltz played its vulgar, teasing little tune.

‘It’s going like a dream!’ said Steiner.

‘Are they stuck?’ enquired Foucarmont, surprised at how long the handshake was lasting.

A memory which he couldn’t get out of his head brought a pink glow to Fauchery’s pale cheeks. He could see again that store of accessories in the theatre with its greenish light and its junk covered in dust and Muffat there holding the egg cup, turning his suspicions to his advantage. Now Muffat’s suspicions had been confirmed. The last shred of his dignity was crumbling away. Fauchery, his fears allayed, saw how merry and bright the countess was and he had the urge to laugh. It suddenly seemed amusing.

‘Oh, here she comes now!’ La Faloise cried. If he thought he’d made a good joke, he couldn’t let it drop. ‘Nana’s over there, can you see her, she’s arrived!’

‘Shut up, you idiot!’ muttered Philippe.

‘It’s true, I tell you! They are playing her tune, for God’s sake, she’s there! And she’s joining in the reconciliation too! My God! What, can’t you

see? She’s clasping all three to her bosom, Fauchery, my cousin and her husband, and calling them her little pets. Oh, these domestic scenes make me sick!’

Estelle had drawn near. Fauchery complimented her while, stiff in her pink dress, she gave them her look of surprise, like a speechless child, glancing now and then at her father and mother. Daguenet, too, was exchanging a warm handshake with the journalist. They made a smiling circle, and the doting Monsieur Venot sidled up behind them like a broody hen, enfolding them in his cloying piety, glad of this final abandon which was preparing the way for Providence.

But the waltz was still swinging cheerily, seductively along. It was a heightened echoing of the pleasure beating against the old house like an incoming tide. In the band the little flutes trilled and swelled, the violins sighed and swooned. Beneath the Genoese velvet, the gold and the paintings, the chandeliers threw out a living heat, in a sort of bright dust, while the throngs of guests, multiplied in the mirrors, seemed to grow ever bigger as the sound of voices got louder. Around the salon, the couples going by with their hands around each other’s waists among the smiling, seated women, made the floorboards quake even more. In the garden, a steady glow from the distant Chinese lanterns illuminated the dark shadows of the guests strolling down the *allées* for a little fresh air.

And this shaking of the walls, and this red glow, were like the last blaze of an ancient noble house, fractured and burning in all four quarters. The sound of crystal shattering noted by Fauchery, the nervous gaiety which was only just beginning that April evening, had grown bolder, wilder, until it had culminated in this magnificent feast. Now the crack was getting bigger. It ran through the house, foreshadowing its imminent collapse. In the homes of the drunks in the faubourgs it was the black misery, the lack of bread to eat, the folly of alcohol emptying every purse, that brought about the ruin of broken families. Here in the crumbling of this vast wealth, suddenly illuminated, the waltz was sounding the death knell of an ancient race. And meanwhile Nana spread invisibly over the dancers, her supple body was decomposing their world, the smell of her floating in the warm air pervaded it to the beat of her vulgar little tune.

It was on the evening of the marriage ceremony in church that Comte Muffat appeared in his wife’s bedroom, where he had not been seen for the last two years. The countess, very surprised, at first drew away from him.

But she was still smiling the merry smile she always had these days. He was very embarrassed and mumbled something. Then she gave him something of a dressing-down. But neither dared explain themselves more clearly. It was religion that required this act of mutual forgiveness. And they came to a tacit agreement that they would retain their freedom. Before getting into bed, as the countess seemed still hesitant, they talked business. He was the first to broach the subject of Les Bordes, and she agreed immediately. They both needed the money badly, they would share it. That completed the reconciliation. Muffat felt a great relief in his remorse.

And that day as Nana was dozing, towards two o'clock, Zoë dared to knock on her bedroom door. The curtains were drawn, a warm breath of air came in through the window in the quiet cool of the half-light. In any case the young woman, though still rather weak, was getting out of bed nowadays. She opened her eyes and asked:

'Who is it?'

Zoë was about to answer when Daguenet pushed his way in and announced himself. Immediately she propped herself up on her pillow and, sending the maidservant away:

'What! You! On your wedding-day! What's the matter then?'

He remained in the middle of the room, surprised at how dark it was. But his eyes were getting used to it and he moved forward, dressed in a suit, with a white tie and gloves. And he said again:

'Well yes, here I am. Don't you remember?

No, she didn't know what he was talking about. He had to brazen it out, jokingly.

'You know, your commission! I am bringing you the gift of my innocence.'

Then when he was there on the edge of the bed she put her naked arms round him, with loud giggles and almost crying because she thought it was so sweet of him.

'Oh, my Mimi, how funny you are! And to think I didn't remember! So you have escaped, you've come from church. Yes, you have, you smell of incense! Well, come and kiss me then, Mimi mine! Harder than that, it might be the last time!'

In the dark bedroom where a faint smell of ether lingered, their tender laughter died away. The great heat made the curtains in the windows lift,

you could hear the voices of children in the street. There was no time to lose; they began to joke again. Daguenet was due to leave with his new wife immediately after the wedding-breakfast.

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CHAPTER 13

TOWARDS the end of September Comte Muffat, who was due at Nana's for dinner that evening, arrived at dusk to tell her about a sudden summons he had received from the Tuileries. The lamps had not yet been lit, but there was loud laughter from the servants' quarters. He went quietly up the stairs where the stained-glass windows glowed in the warm shadow. At the top, the door to the salon made no sound. A rose-coloured evening light was dying on the ceiling. The red curtains, the deep sofas, the lacquered furniture, the clutter of embroidered cloths, bronzes and porcelain seemed already slumbering, submersed in the creeping shadows that had fallen in every corner without leaving a single gleam of ivory or sparkle of gold behind. And there in the dark, on the only clearly visible surface, a large white outspread petticoat, was Nana lying in the arms of Georges. Any denial was impossible. He uttered a strangled cry and just stood there open-mouthed.

Nana had jumped up and was pushing him into the bedroom to give the boy time to make his escape. 'Come in,' she murmured frantically, 'I can explain…'

It exasperated her to be taken by surprise like that. She *never* succumbed in her salon with the doors wide open. It had taken a quarrel with Georges, who was madly jealous of Philippe. He was sobbing on her shoulder so bitterly that she had given in, unable to calm him down and basically very sorry for him. And when for once she had been so stupid as to forget herself, with a rascal of a boy who could not even afford to buy her a bunch of violets nowadays, since his mother held the purse strings, the count had to arrive and catch them in flagrante. Really, what bad luck! And that's what you got for showing a bit of kindness!

Meanwhile she had pushed Muffat into her bedroom where it was completely dark. So she groped around and rang furiously for a lamp. It was all Julien's fault! If there had been a lamp in the salon, none of this would have happened. That silly darkness coming down had played havoc with her feelings.

‘Darling, please, please be reasonable,’ she pleaded when Zoë had brought a lamp.

The count had sat down with his hands on his knees and was staring at the floor, struck dumb by what he had just witnessed. He couldn’t even manage a cry of anger. He shuddered as if overcome by icy horror. This silent pain touched the young woman. She tried to comfort him.

‘Well, I know it was wrong of me. It was very wrong what I did. I’m really sorry and I am sad that you are so upset. Come on now, be nice, forgive me.’

She had crouched down at his feet, meekly trying to make him look at her so that she could judge how cross he was. Then, as with copious sighs, he was getting over it, she grew even more coaxing, and in a voice that was both earnest and tender, offered him one final explanation:

‘Look, darling, you have to understand. I can’t refuse one of my poor friends.’

The count was allowing himself to be persuaded. His only demand was that she get rid of Georges. But all his illusions were dead, he no longer believed in her promises of fidelity. The next day Nana would be in bed with someone else. And he only went on in this state of torment because of his pathetic need to possess her, because of his terror of life and the idea of living without her.

It was at the period in her life when Nana was dazzling Paris society more than ever. Her star was rising higher and higher on the horizon of vice, and she was dominating the city with the flaunting of her riches and her disdain for money that in a very public fashion caused ruin all around. In her house, it was like the spark from a forge. Her constant desire for one thing or another flamed into being, the least breath from her lips and gold turned to dust and was swept away every hour in the wind. Never had people seen such a crazy passion for spending money. The house seemed to be built over a bottomless pit, men and their possessions, their bodies, even their names were sucked into it without leaving so much as a speck of dust behind. This girl, whose tastes were like those of a parrot, munching radishes and chocolate and nibbling at bits of meat, had an account for her food amounting to five thousand francs a month. In the buttery everything was being thrown away in alarming quantities, the barrels of wine were emptied and bills got ever more inflated as they passed through three or four successive hands. Victorine and François reigned in the kitchen, where

they invited a host of people, not to mention a whole tribe of cousins who only ate cold meat and fatty soup when they were at home. Julien demanded discounts from the tradesmen, the glaziers didn’t put in a pane of glass for thirty sous without him adding another twenty for himself. Charles got through the horses’ oats, doubling the orders and selling at the back door what was coming in through the front. In the middle of this general squandering of money, in this wholesale looting of the citadel, Zoë artfully managed to keep up appearances, covering up the thefts of everyone else in order to conceal and manage her own among them. But still worse was all the waste; leftovers were thrown in the bin, the servants were disgusted by the sheer amount of food, the sticky glasses, the gas burning so fiercely it nearly set fire to the walls; and things were left undone, or done out of spite or by accident—all of which can hasten the ruin of a house being devoured by so many mouths. And then upstairs, in Madame’s abode, the damage was worse still. Dresses costing ten thousand francs which had only been worn twice were sold by Zoë. Jewels went missing, as though crumbled away in the backs of drawers. Stupid purchases, the latest fashionable items, were forgotten in some corner the next day and swept out into the street. She couldn’t set eyes on anything expensive without wanting to buy it, so around her there was always a chaos of flowers and valuable knick-knacks, and the more her passing fancy cost, the happier she was. It all ran through her fingers; she broke everything, it withered, it got dirty in her dainty white fingers; strewn around in her wake a nameless debris, twisted scraps, muddy tatters marked her passage. Then in the midst of this squandering of ready money, the big bills would arrive: twenty thousand francs at the fashion boutique, thirty thousand at the draper’s, twelve thousand at the bootmaker’s. Her stables swallowed fifty thousand. In six months she ran up a bill of one hundred and twenty thousand francs at her dressmaker’s. Without having increased the size of her household, estimated by Labordette at costing an average of four hundred thousand francs, she managed to spend a million that year and was herself astonished at the figure and incapable of saying where such a sum of money had vanished. Men lined up one after the other, emptying gold by the barrowload, but still didn’t manage to fill the bottomless pit getting ever wider under the fractured floor of her house of luxury.

But Nana was cherishing one last fancy. Again obsessed with the thought of redecorating her bedroom, she thought she had found the

solution: a room of tea-rose velvet, with little silver buttons, and tassels and gold lace draped like a tent hanging from the ceiling. That would look lovely and luxurious and would set off her auburn hair and rosy skin. The room was in any case designed to provide the setting for the bed, which was to be a sensation, a dazzling sight. Nana was dreaming of a bed such as had never been seen before, a sort of throne, an altar to which the whole of Paris would come and worship her sovereign nakedness. It would be all in chased gold and silver, just like an enormous jewel, with golden roses scattered on a silver trellis. At the head, a group of laughing cherubs would be leaning over, wreathed in flowers, trying to spy on the voluptuous goings-on in the shade of the curtains. She had sought the advice of Labordette who had brought two goldsmiths along and they had already started working on the designs. The bed would cost fifty thousand francs and Muffat was to give it to her as a New Year present.

It astonished the young woman that, despite this river of gold flowing constantly through her hands, she was always short of money. Some days she was hounded for paltry sums of a few louis. She had to borrow from Zoë, or scrape together some herself to the best of her ability. But before resorting to extreme measures she tried to tap her friends, getting hold of whatever her men had on them, even a few sous, making a joke of it. For the last three months, she had been emptying Philippe’s pockets in particular and he never came now at these times of crisis without having to leave his purse behind. Before long, she was bold enough to ask him for loans of two or three hundred francs, never more than that, for bills or pressing debts. And Philippe, who had been appointed paymaster to the regiment in July, brought the money the next day, apologizing for not being rich, since the estimable Madame Hugon now kept her sons on a particularly tight leash. After three months these little loans, which were frequently renewed, amounted to tens of thousands of francs. The captain still had his fine, hearty laugh. But he was losing weight, and was sometimes distracted, and looked as if he were suffering. Yet one glance from Nana and he was transfigured by a kind of sensual ecstasy. She was like a little cat with him, intoxicating him with kisses behind doors, possessing him with sudden abandonment, and this kept him hanging on to her skirts as soon as he could escape from his duties.

One evening Nana, having announced that she was also called Thérèse and that her feast day was on 15 October, the gentlemen all sent her

presents. Captain Philippe brought his, an old sweet dish of Dresden china mounted in gold. He found her alone in her dressing room getting out of the bath and with nothing on but a large red-and-white dressing gown, very intent on examining the presents spread out over the table. She had already broken a rock-crystal scent bottle as she tried to take the stopper out.

‘Oh, how lovely of you!’ she said. ‘What is it? Show me… Oh, what a baby you are, spending your money on little gewgaws like that!’

She scolded him because he didn’t have a lot of money, but deep down very gratified to see him spending it all on her—the only proof of love which meant anything to her. Meanwhile she was fiddling about with the sweet dish, wanting to see how it was made, lifting the lid and putting it on again.

‘Take care,’ he murmured. ‘It’s fragile.’

But she shrugged. Did he think she was a clumsy street porter? And suddenly the little knob came away in her fingers, the lid fell and shattered. She was aghast when she saw the shards and said:

‘Oh, it’s broken!’

Then she started to laugh. The pieces on the floor struck her as funny. It was a nervous gaiety, she had the stupid, malicious laugh of a child who enjoys destroying things. Philippe had a moment’s revulsion. The wretched woman did not know how much anguish this trinket had cost him. When she saw how upset he was she tried to regain control of herself.

‘Well, it’s not my fault… It was cracked. These old things don’t last. And the lid! Did you see the way it turned a somersault?’

And again she burst out laughing hysterically. But as the young man’s eyes were filling with tears in spite of himself, she threw her arms round his neck.

‘Don’t be silly! I love you just the same! If we didn’t break things, the shopkeepers wouldn’t sell anything. All this is made to be broken. Look at this fan! Is it only stuck together?’

She had seized hold of a fan, pulling on the ribs, and the silk ripped. That seemed to excite her. In order to show she didn’t care a jot about the other presents since she had just broken his, she treated herself to a wholesale massacre, proving that there wasn’t one solid thing among them, by destroying them all. Her eyes lit up with a vacant gleam, her lips drew back to reveal her white teeth. Then when everything was in pieces, very

red in the face and laughing again, she banged on the table with her hands spread out and lisped like a little girl:

‘All gone! All gone!’

Then Philippe, infected by her excitement, cheered up and kissed her breasts, bending her over backwards. She yielded, hanging on to his shoulders, so ecstatic that she did not remember having enjoyed it so much for a long time. And not letting him go, in a caressing voice:

‘Tell me, darling, can you bring me ten louis tomorrow… I have a problem, a bill from my baker which is bothering me.’

He went white. Then, planting one last kiss on her forehead, he said simply:

‘I’ll try.’

Silence reigned. She got dressed. He pressed his head against the windowpane. After a minute he came back and went on slowly:

‘Nana, you should marry me.’

This idea made the young woman giggle so much that she could not finish tying up her petticoats.

‘But my poor boy, are you sickening for something? Is it because I’m asking you for ten louis that you are offering to marry me? Never! I love you too much. What a stupid idea!’

And as Zoë was coming in to help her with her boots, they did not speak of it any more. The maidservant had her eye straight away on the remnants of the presents on the table. She asked if she should clear them up. And when Madame told her to throw them away, she carried them all off in a fold of her skirt. In the kitchen Madame’s rubbish was sorted through and shared amongst the servants.

That day Georges, in spite of being forbidden by Nana, had arrived in the house. François had seen him go up but the servants had got to the point of laughing among themselves about the embarrassment of the bourgeoisie. He had just slipped in to the small salon when he was stopped short by his brother’s voice, and rooted to the spot behind the door, he heard the whole conversation, the kisses, the offer of marriage. His blood froze, and he went off feeling very ridiculous and as though there was a huge void under his skull. It was only when he got to the Rue de Richelieu in his room above his mother’s apartment that his heart burst, and he broke into furious sobbing. This time there was no doubt in his mind. A repulsive image rose constantly

in front of his eyes, Nana in Philippe’s arms. And it seemed like incest to him. When he felt a bit calmer, this memory returned and a fresh crisis of jealous rage threw him on to his bed, he tore at the sheets with his teeth, shouting and cursing, and that maddened him even more. The day went by in this fashion. He pleaded a migraine in order to remain locked in his room. But at night it was even more dreadful. A murderous fever took hold of him, with constant nightmares. If his brother had been living at home, he would have gone and knifed him. When day dawned, he tried to reason with himself. He was the one who ought to die, he would throw himself out of the window when an omnibus went past. He went out at ten. He roamed round Paris, wandered over the bridges, felt at the last minute the unconquerable need to see Nana again. Perhaps a word from her would save him. And three o’clock struck as he was entering the house in the Avenue de Villiers.

Towards midday a dreadful piece of news had laid Madame Hugon low. Philippe had been put in prison the previous evening, he was accused of having stolen twelve thousand francs from his regiment’s cash desk. For the last three months he had been embezzling small sums of money, intending to put them back afterwards, and hiding what was missing with counterfeit coins. And he always got away with this fraudulent scheme, thanks to the negligence of his supervisors. The elderly woman, devastated by her son’s crime, at first cursed Nana angrily. She knew of Philippe’s liaison, and this misfortune caused her a great deal of distress and kept her in Paris, fearing some catastrophe; but she had never imagined such a shameful situation as this and now reproached herself for being complicit by her refusals to give him money. Her legs gave way, and she collapsed into an armchair, feeling numb and incapable of doing anything, as though she might remain there till she died. But the sudden thought of Georges offered some consolation. She still had Georges, he would be able to do something, and perhaps save them. So without asking help from anybody, but wanting to bury these things in the family, she dragged herself upstairs, attached to the thought that she still had somebody to love her. But she found the bedroom empty. The concierge told her that Monsieur Georges had gone out early. She sensed a second misfortune waiting for her in this bedroom. The bed with its gnawed sheets told of his anguish. A chair thrown on the floor under some clothes looked like a corpse. Georges must be with that woman. And

Madame Hugon, now with dry eyes and a determined step, went downstairs again. She wanted her sons, she was leaving to get them back.

Since early that morning Nana had had problems. First it was the baker who had turned up at nine o'clock with his bill, a paltry affair of one hundred and thirty-three francs for bread, that in all the regal luxury of her household she had not managed to settle. He had come a score of times, annoyed that she had ceased dealing with him the day he refused her any more credit. And the servants were on his side. François told him that Madame would never pay him unless he made a great fuss, Charles was talking of going up as well to see her and settle an outstanding account for straw, while Victorine advised waiting till some gentleman or other arrived and getting money out of him by intervening during their conversation. The whole kitchen was up in arms, all the traders were told about it, and the servants gossiped about Madame, stripping her naked, dissecting her, and recounting her goings-on for three or four hours at a time, the malicious talk of servants who are treated very well but don't have enough to do. Only Julien, the butler, pretended to stand up for Madame. She wasn't a bad sort, all the same. And when the others accused him of going to bed with her, he laughed in a smug sort of way, which made the cook mad; she wished she was a man so she could spit on the backsides of women like her, it disgusted her so much. Spitefully, François had kept the baker in the hall without telling Madame, and when she came down for lunch Madame found him confronting her face to face. She took the bill and told him to come back at three. So, cursing loudly, he left, swearing he would be back at three and would get paid somehow, come what may.

Nana lunched badly, very annoyed by this scene. She really must get rid of this man. She had put money aside on a dozen occasions, but it had just melted away, one day on flowers, another day on a subscription in aid of an old gendarme. In any case she relied on Philippe, and was surprised that he had not already appeared with her two hundred francs. It was really bad luck, the day before she had paid for a complete outfit for Satin, nearly twelve hundred francs' worth of dresses and lingerie. And there was not a single louis left in the house.

Towards two o'clock, Nana was beginning to get worried when Labordette arrived. He brought designs for the bed. This was a distraction, a delightful interval which made the young woman forget everything else. She clapped her hands and danced. Then, bursting with curiosity and

leaning over a table in the salon, she studied the designs which Labordette was going through with her:

‘This is the bed, in the shape of a boat, in the middle is a little bunch of full-blown roses, then there’s a garland of flowers and some buds. The leaves will be in gold-green and the roses in red-gold. And here is the grand design for the bedhead: cherubs dancing in a round on a silver trellis.’

But Nana interrupted him, carried away by her excitement.

‘Oh, how sweet that little one is in the corner with his bottom in the air! Isn’t he? And that impish smile! They’ve all got wicked eyes! Do you know, my dear, I’d never dare do anything naughty in front of them!’

She was extraordinarily well pleased with herself. The goldsmiths had said that no queen had ever slept in such a bed as this. There was only one complication. Labordette showed her two designs for the bed-end, one of them reproducing the boat motif, the other a completely different subject, Night enveloped in veils and a Faun discovering her startling nakedness. He added that if she chose that subject, the goldsmiths were intending to give Night the likeness of Nana. This idea, of doubtful taste, made her pale with delight. She saw herself as a silver statuette symbolizing the warm voluptuousness of the darkness.

‘Of course, you would only have to pose for the head and shoulders,’ said Labordette.

She looked at him unperturbed.

‘Why? If it is a question of a work of art why should I worry about the sculptor seeing me?’

It was obvious she had chosen the subject of Night and the Faun. But he stopped her.

‘Wait a moment, it’s six thousand francs more!’

‘As if I cared about that!’ she cried, bursting out laughing. ‘My little Mufe has heaps of money!’

Nowadays among friends that was her name for Comte Muffat. And her gentlemen friends called him that too when they mentioned him: ‘Did you see your little Mufe last night?… Oh, I expected to find your little Mufe here!’ A nickname that she didn’t yet dare to use in his presence.

Labordette was rolling up the drawings, giving her the final details: the goldsmiths had agreed to deliver the bed within two months, by 25 December. The following week a sculptor would come to make a model for

Night. As she was seeing him out, Nana remembered the baker. And she said suddenly:

‘By the way, you don’t by any chance have ten louis on you?’

One of Labordette’s principles, which had always stood him in good stead, was never to lend money to women. He always gave the same answer.

‘No, dear girl, I’m broke. But do you want me to ask your little Mufe for you?’

She refused. It was useless. Two days before, she had tapped the count for five thousand francs. However, she regretted her discreet refusal, for after Labordette had gone, the baker put in another appearance, although it was not quite half past two. And he plumped himself down on a bench in the hall, cursing loudly. The young woman could hear him from upstairs. She went pale, especially vexed when she heard the muffled delight of the servants. They were doubled up with laughter in the kitchen. The coachman was looking across from the back of the yard; François crossed the hall for no special reason and then hastened to keep them up to date, after throwing a sympathetic grin in the direction of the baker. They did not give a jot for Madame, they were splitting their sides with laughter, and she felt very much on her own, faced with the scorn and vulgar mud-slinging of the servants’ quarters. She’d thought of borrowing the hundred and thirty-three francs from Zoë, but abandoned that idea. She already owed her money and was too proud to risk a refusal. She was in such a state that she went back into her bedroom, muttering to herself.

‘Go on, my girl, rely on yourself and yourself alone. Your body is yours and it’s better to make use of it than put up with such rudeness.’

And even without calling Zoë, she got dressed feverishly to hurry over to La Tricon’s establishment. That was her last port of call at times of greatest need. Very much in demand and constantly sollicited by the elderly lady, she either said no or resigned herself, according to what she needed. And on those days, which were becoming more and more frequent, when there were gaps in her lavish budget, she was sure of getting the twenty-five louis awaiting her there. She went stoically along to La Tricon’s just as the poor go along to the pawnbroker’s.

But on her way out she bumped into Georges who was standing in the middle of the salon. She didn’t see that he was pale as death, the dark fire in

his wide eyes. She breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Oh, so you’ve been sent here by Philippe?’

‘No,’ said the boy, going even whiter.

Then she made a gesture of despair. What did he want then? Why was he blocking her way? Look, she was in a hurry. Then, coming back, she said:

‘You haven’t got any money?’

‘No.’

‘How silly of me, of course you haven’t! Not even a radish, not even six sous for the omnibus! Maman won’t let me! There’s men for you!’

And she made to slip away. But he stopped her, he wanted to talk to her. She was in a hurry and said again that she didn’t have time, when he prevented her:

‘Listen, I know you are going to marry my brother.’

Now that really was comical! She dropped into a chair to laugh loud and long.

‘Yes,’ the boy went on. ‘And I don’t want you to. I’m the one you’re going to marry. I’ve come to ask you.’

‘Sorry? What? You too!’ she cried. ‘What’s wrong with this family? But no, no, no! What a dreadful idea! Have I ever asked such a disgusting thing of you? Neither one nor the other, never!’

Georges’s face lit up. Had he perhaps got it wrong? He went on again:

‘So do you swear you are not sleeping with my brother?’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, you are driving me mad,’ said Nana who had risen to her feet impatiently. ‘It’s funny for a moment, but I told you I’m in a hurry! I sleep with your brother when I feel like it. Am I your kept woman, are you paying me that you can exact your dues like that? Yes, I do sleep with your brother.’

He had caught hold of her arm and was squeezing it as if he would break it, stammering:

‘Don’t say that, don’t say that!’

With a slap she freed herself from his grasp.

‘He’s hurting me now! Look at this boy! You clear off, my dear, and pretty damn quick! I kept on seeing you out of the goodness of my heart. Yes, that’s right! Stop staring at me like that with those great big eyes! I suppose you were hoping I would look after you as if I were your maman

for the rest of your life? Well, I've got better things to do than bring up kids!'

He listened in a great deal of distress and in a state of numbness, but he didn't respond with anger. Each word she spoke was another blow that cut him to the quick; he felt she was killing him. She went on, not even seeing that he couldn't bear it, pleased after the morning's vexations to take it out on him.

'You're just like your brother, he's another one! He promised me two hundred francs. Oh yes, some hopes! Not that I depend upon his money! It's not even enough to pay for my pomade… But he's causing me no end of problems. Listen, do you know something? It's because of him I'm going out to earn twenty-five louis with another man.'

Then, wildly, Georges barred her way. And he wailed, he pleaded with her, wringing his hands, stammering:

'Oh no, no, no!'

'All right then,' she said. 'Have you got the cash?'

No, he didn't have the money. He would have given his life to have the money. He had never felt so worthless, so useless, so young. The poor soul, shaken by tears, expressed such terrible suffering that she finally noticed and began to melt. She put him gently from her.

'Come on, my pet, let me through, you have to. Be reasonable. You are just a baby, and that was nice for a week or so, but nowadays I have to consider my own interests. Think about it… Your brother is after all a grown man. I am not saying that… with him… Oh, do me a favour and don't tell him about all this. He doesn't need to know where I'm going. I say too much when I'm worked up.'

She was laughing. Then, taking him, kissing him on the forehead:

'Farewell, Bébé, it's over, well and truly over, do you hear? I'm off.'

And off she went. He was left standing in the middle of the salon. Her last words rang in his ears like a knell: 'It's over, well and truly over.' And he felt the earth open up under him. In the vacuum of his brain, the man who was waiting for Nana had disappeared. Only Philippe remained, in the naked arms of the young woman, there for all eternity. She did not deny it, she must love him because she wanted him not to suffer the pain of her unfaithfulness. It was over, well and truly over. He breathed hard, looked around the room, choked by the weight which was crushing him. Memories

came back one by one, the happy nights in La Mignotte, those sweet hours when he pretended he was her little boy, and then those hours of pleasure stolen in this very room. But never, never again! He was too young, he had not grown up fast enough. Philippe had replaced him because he had a beard. So this was the end then, he couldn't go on living. His sinful passion had wallowed in an infinite love, a sensual adoration, which engulfed his whole being. But how could he ever forget while his brother was still around? His brother, his own flesh and blood, another self whose pleasure made him mad with jealousy. It was the end, he wanted to die.

All the doors were still open and the servants, who had seen Madame go out, were clattering noisily around the house. Down below, on the bench in the hall, the baker was laughing with Charles and François. As Zoë hurried through the living room, she was surprised to see Georges and asked if he was waiting for Madame. Yes, he was waiting for her, he had forgotten to give her the answer to her message. But left to himself, he started to hunt around. Not finding anything else, he took a very sharp pair of scissors which Nana was forever using to attend to her person, pluck at her face, clip hairs. or trim nails. So for an hour he waited, with his fingers nervously clutching the scissors, his hand in his pocket.

'Here's Madame,' said Zoë, coming back, who must have been watching for her through the bedroom window.

There was much scurrying around in the household. The laughter died away and doors closed. Georges heard Nana paying the baker in curt tones. Then she came upstairs.

'What! You still here!' she said on seeing him. 'Oh, you and I will fall out, my lad!'

He followed her while she made her way towards the bedroom.

'Nana, will you marry me?'

But she shrugged. It was too stupid, she made no further answer. She thought she might shut the door in his face.

'Nana, will you marry me?'

She banged the door. With one hand he opened it again while with the other he brought out the scissors from his pocket. And quite simply, with one terrifying movement, he stuck them in his breast.

Meanwhile Nana, conscious that something bad was happening, turned round. When she saw him pierce himself, she was filled with indignation.

‘Oh, how stupid! How stupid! And with my scissors as well! For goodness’ sake, stop it, you wicked boy! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!’

She was terrified. The boy was on his knees and had just stuck the scissors in again and it had thrown him full length on to the rug. He was lying across the threshold. At that point she lost her head, shouting as loud as she could, not daring to step over this body which was blocking the way and preventing her from getting help.

‘Zoë, Zoë, come quickly! Make him stop! He’s killing himself now! And in my house! I’ve never seen such a thing!’

He terrified her. He was white, his eyes were closed. He was hardly bleeding at all, scarcely a thin stain showed through his waistcoat. She was just summoning up the courage to step over him when an apparition caused her to recoil. Through the salon door opposite, which had remained open, an elderly lady was approaching. Horrified and unable to understand what she was doing there, Nana realized it was Madame Hugon. She shrank back even more, still wearing her hat and gloves. She was so terrified that in a halting voice she tried to defend herself.

‘Madame, it wasn’t me, I swear. He wanted to marry me, I said no, and he killed himself.’

Slowly Madame Hugon, white-haired and clad in black, approached, her face pale. In the cab, the thought of Georges had deserted her and Philippe’s misdemeanours possessed her again. Perhaps *that woman* could provide explanations for his behaviour that would move the judges to clemency. And her plan was to beg her to make a statement in favour of her son. Downstairs all the doors were open, so she was struggling up the stairs on her bad legs when suddenly the cries of terror guided her in the right direction. Upstairs a man was lying on the floor with his shirt stained with blood. It was her other son, Georges.

Nana repeated foolishly:

‘He wanted to marry me, I said no, and he killed himself.’

Without uttering a word, Madame Hugon bent down. Yes, it was her other son, it was indeed Georges. One dishonoured, the other assassinated. It did not surprise her, given the way her life was collapsing into total ruin. Kneeling on the rug, unconscious of her surroundings, unaware of anyone else, she stared at Georges’s face, she listened, one hand on his heart. Then she gave a little sigh. She had felt his heartbeat. Then she raised her head,

looked around the room and at the woman, and seemed to remember where she was. A light gleamed in her vacant eyes and her silence was so noble and terrible that Nana quaked, as she continued to defend herself over this body lying prostrate between them.

‘I swear, Madame… If his brother was here he could explain…’

‘His brother stole money, he’s in prison’, said his mother harshly.

Nana was so upset she could not speak. Why all this? So now the other one had been stealing! Were they all off their heads in this family? She gave up trying to make sense of it, and as though no longer in her own home, let Madame Hugon give the orders. Servants had come running upstairs, the old woman told them to take her unconscious son down to her cab without delay. She would get him out of that house, even if it killed him. Nana looked at the servants with an air of dumb incomprehension as they took hold of poor Zizi by the shoulders and legs. His mother walked behind, now exhausted, holding on to the furniture, as though annihilated by the loss of everything she loved. On the landing she sobbed, turned round, and twice said:

‘Oh, you have done us so much harm! You have done us so much harm!’

And that was all. Nana sat down in her befuddled state, still with her gloves and hat on. The house was relapsing into a heavy silence, the carriage had just driven away. She remained motionless, unthinking, the event spinning round and round in her head. A quarter of an hour later Comte Muffat found her in the same position. But then she found relief in a torrent of words, recounting the dreadful occurrence, going back over the same details time and time again, picking up the bloodstained scissors to imitate Zizi’s gesture when he had stabbed himself. And above all she was anxious to protest her innocence.

‘Tell me, darling, is it my fault? If you were a judge, would you say I was guilty? I didn’t tell Philippe to help himself to the cash, any more than I made that poor little wretch do away with himself. In all of this I’m the one who is most wretched. People come to do stupid things in my house, they make me suffer and treat me like a slut…’

And she started to cry. In a nervous reaction she became weak and emotional, tearful and very miserable.

‘And *you* look as if you are vexed as well. You ask Zoë if I am at fault. Zoë, tell him, explain to Monsieur…’

In the last few minutes the maidservant had taken a towel and a basin from the dressing room and had been rubbing at the carpet to get the bloodstain out, while it was fresh.

‘Oh, Monsieur,’ she said, ‘Madame is really upset.’

Muffat was stunned, horrified by this tragedy. His thoughts were full of the mother weeping for her sons. He knew what a warm heart she had, he could imagine her in her widow’s weeds, dying alone in Les Fondettes. But Nana was growing even more desperate. Now the image of Zizi on the floor with the round red mark on his shirt was more than she could bear.

‘He was so sweet, so gentle, so loving! Oh, my pet, I’m sorry if that makes you cross but I loved him, my Bébé! I can’t stop crying, I can’t help it. And anyway now it can’t hurt you. You’ve got what you wanted, you can be sure you won’t find us in bed together again.’

And this last desperately sad thought choked her so much that he ended up comforting her. Come now, she must be strong. She was right, it wasn’t her fault. But she stopped of her own accord to say:

‘Listen, go and find out how he is, now, straight away! I tell you!’

He took his hat and went to find out how Georges was. On his return three-quarters of an hour later, he saw Nana leaning anxiously out of the window. And he shouted to her from the pavement that the boy wasn’t dead, and they even hoped to be able to save him. At that, she jumped up and down immediately with joy. She sang, she danced, life was good again. However, Zoë was not happy with her cleaning. She was still looking at the mark and repeating every time she passed it:

‘Madame, it hasn’t gone, you know.’

And the stain would indeed keep reappearing, a pinkish colour, on a white rosette on the carpet, as though the splash of blood were barring the very entrance to the room.

‘Nonsense,’ said Nana. ‘It will get rubbed out when people walk on it.’

By the next day Comte Muffat had forgotten the whole affair too. In the cab taking him to the Rue de Richelieu, he had briefly sworn to himself he would never go back to that woman. Heaven had sent him a warning, and he saw in the misfortunes of Philippe and Georges a presage of his own downfall. But neither the spectacle of Madame Hugon in tears nor the boy in a burning fever had been serious enough to make him keep his oath. And after the short-lived shock of this tragedy, what remained was the secret

pleasure of being rid of a rival whose youthful charms had always exasperated him. His passion for her now was exclusive, the kind of passion of a man who has never been young himself. His love for Nana was linked with the need to know that she was his and his alone, to hear her voice, to touch her, to breathe the same air. It was a love which went beyond the senses into a pure emotion, an anxious affection; he was jealous of her past, sometimes dreaming of redemption, of both of them receiving forgiveness as they knelt before God the Father. Every day religion tightened its hold on him. Always conflicted, he went to church again, to confession and communion, augmenting the joys of sin and penitence with remorse. Then, as his confessor had given him permission to work through this passion until it was over, he had started to make a habit of this daily dose of damnation, which he redeemed with bursts of religious zeal full of pious humility. With great naïvety he offered to God, as a kind of expiation, the abominable torments he was suffering. This torture was still increasing as, having fallen into the hands of a voraciously sensual woman, he, a believer, climbed his calvary with an earnest and heavy heart. But what he was agonizing about above everything else were the constant infidelities of this woman. He could not get used to sharing her, he did not understand her foolish impulses. He wanted an everlasting love that never wavered. However, she had made a solemn promise and he was paying her for that. But he felt her to be duplicitous, incapable of restraining herself, giving herself to her friends, or anyone who happened along, like an innocent beast born to go about unclothed.

One morning when he saw Foucarmont coming out of her house at an odd hour, he made a scene. Immediately she fired up, weary of his jealousy. Already on numerous occasions she had been nice to him about it. For example, the evening he had surprised her in bed with Georges she had been the first to come round and apologize for her wrongdoing, showering him with kisses to make him forget it. But in the end he drove her to distraction with his obstinate refusal to understand women; and she was brutally honest.

‘Well yes, I slept with Foucarmont. What about it? So does that make you mad, my little Mufe*?*’

It was the first time she’d called him that to his face. Her frank admission made him choke with rage. And as he clenched his fists, she went up to him and looked him in the eyes.

‘That’s enough, don’t you think? If it doesn’t suit you, do me the favour of getting out. I don’t want you shouting and screaming in my house. Get it into your stupid head that I insist on my freedom. When I find a man attractive, I sleep with him. Yes, that’s how it is. And you may as well get that straight. Yes or no, you can go.’

She had gone to open the door. He did not leave. Now it was her way of binding him to her even more tightly. At the slightest tiff, nothing at all, she would tell him to take it or leave it, saying horrible things to him. Ha, she could always find someone better than him, she was spoilt for choice. She could pick up any man, as many as she wanted, men who were a lot more expert, with red blood in their veins. He bowed his head and waited for happier times when she needed his money. At those times she became tender towards him, and one night of love would make him forget, and compensated for all the torments of the week. His reconciliation with his wife had made his home unbearable. The countess, abandoned by Fauchery who had fallen back into Rose’s hands, was indulging in a series of wild love affairs, in the impulsive way women of forty often do, constantly on edge, filling the house with the exasperating hustle and bustle of her life. Since her wedding, Estelle had not seen her father. From this flat-chested and unprepossessing girl, a woman with a will of iron had suddenly emerged; she was so uncompromising that Daguenet quaked in her presence. Nowadays, a convert to religion, he went to Mass with her, furious with his father-in-law who was ruining them with that trollop. Only Monsieur Venot, biding his time, did not waver in his affection for the count. He had even managed to get an introduction to Nana’s household, and frequented both houses. You encountered his perpetual smile behind every door. And Muffat, who was miserable in his own house, driven out by anxiety and shame, still chose to live in the Avenue de Villiers despite all Nana’s insults.

Soon one question and one alone remained between Nana and the count: money. One day, after promising faithfully to give her ten thousand francs, he had dared to turn up at the appointed time empty-handed. For the last couple of days she had been kissing and cuddling him, so when he broke his promise like that, and she had wasted so much affection on him, she launched into torrents of abuse. She was white with rage.

‘Oh, so you don’t have the cash? Well then, my little Mufe, go back where you came from double-quick! What a swine! And he wanted to kiss

me into the bargain! No money, no nothing, do you hear?’

He started explaining, he would be able to get the sum the day after next. But she interrupted him violently.

‘And what about my debts! I’ll be arrested, I will, while Monsieur comes hoping for a free night… Oh, just look at you! Do you imagine that I love you for your looks? With an ugly mug like yours, you pay women to put up with you. For God’s sake! If you don’t bring me ten thousand francs this very evening, you won’t even get to suck the end of my little finger! I mean it! I shall send you back to your wife!’

In the evening he brought her the ten thousand francs. Nana offered her lips. And he gave her a long-drawn-out kiss, which consoled him for his day of anguish. What annoyed the young woman was having him constantly in her skirts. She complained to Monsieur Venot, begging him to return her little Mufe to the countess. What was the point of their reconciliation otherwise? And she was sorry she’d had anything to do with that since she was lumbered with him in any case. The days when she forgot where her best interests lay, she swore to play such a dirty trick on him that he would not be able to set foot in her house again. But, as she said loudly, slapping her thighs, she could have spat in his face and he would still have stood there and thanked her for it. Then the frightful scenes about money were endless. She demanded it with brutal frankness, there were rows over paltry amounts, an odious greediness all the time, a cruelty in telling him over and over that she slept with him for his money and for no other reason and that she didn’t enjoy it, and that she loved somebody else and that she was most unfortunate to need an idiot like him! At Court they didn’t want him any more either, and they talked about asking for his resignation. The Empress had said: ‘He’s really too disgusting’, and that was very true. Nana ended every quarrel with the words:

‘Pah, you are disgusting!’

These days, she just didn’t care, she had regained her total freedom. Every day she made her circle of the lake, starting liaisons which continued elsewhere. It was the parade of high-class prostitution. There in broad daylight the most famous courtesans displayed themselves under the tolerant smile and in all the dazzling luxury of Paris. Duchesses pointed her out to one another, and bourgeoises who had come into money copied her hats. Sometimes, allowed to pass, her landau held up a line of splendid carriages, financiers who held the purse strings of Europe, ministers whose

fat fingers had France by the throat. And she was a part of the society of the Bois, she had an important role there, she was known in all the capitals of Europe, much in demand from foreign visitors, enhancing the splendour of this crowd with her mad debauchery as though it were the very glory and sharpest pleasure of the nation. Then there were the nocturnal liaisons, the continual passing fancies—which she promptly forgot about next morning—when she was taken out to the best restaurants, often to the Café de Madrid* on nice days. She was much in demand in the embassies, she dined with Lucy Stewart, Caroline Héquet, Maria Blond in the company of gentlemen who, while murdering the French language, were paying for their pleasure, booking the women for the evening's entertainment, but were so blasé and gormless, they didn't even touch them. And the women called that 'going out for some fun'; they came back in a good mood after treating them like that, to finish the night then in the arms of their regular lovers.

Comte Muffat pretended not to know about all this, as long as she did not parade her liaisons in front of him; but it must be said he suffered a lot from the little humiliations in his daily life. The house in the Avenue de Villiers became a hell-hole, a madhouse where everything was falling apart and provoking dreadful crises. Nana started to pick fights with her servants. One moment she was very nice to Charles, the coachman; when she was in a restaurant, she sent him out beers via the waiter. She chatted to him from her landau, amused by him and finding him hilarious when he had a slanging match with fellow coachmen in the middle of a stream of cabs. Then, without any reason whatsoever, she would call him an idiot. She was always quibbling about the straw, the bran, or the oats. In spite of her love of animals, she thought her horses ate too much. Then one day when they were doing the accounts, she accused him of robbing her, and Charles got angry and crudely called her a whore. His horses were worth more than her, that was certain, they didn't sleep around with all and sundry. She answered him in the same vein, the count had to separate them and get rid of the coachman. But it was the beginning of a debacle with the servants. Victorine and Francis left after a theft of diamonds. Julien disappeared. And the story went round that it was Monsieur who had begged him to leave and had given him a whole lot of money because he was sleeping with Madame. Every week you saw new faces in the servants' quarters. Never had there been such waste. The house was like a thoroughfare through which the

rejects from the employment agencies passed like the forces of chaos. Zoë was the only one left, with her orderly manner and her one concern to organize this mess for as long as it took to get together enough savings, a plan she had been developing now for some time.

And these were just the problems the count could admit to. He put up with Madame Maloir's inanities and played bezique with her in spite of the rancid smell she gave off. He put up with Madame Lerat and her tittle-tattle, with poor little Louis and his moaning, afflicted as he was by some horrible disease passed down from an unknown father. But sometimes the count had to bear even worse. One night, listening at a door, he had heard Nana angrily telling the maidservant about a so-called wealthy man who had just swindled her out of money. Yes, a nice-looking man who said he was American, with gold mines in his own country, but he was a bastard who had crept off while she was asleep without leaving a penny and even taking with him a book of cigarette papers. And the count, very pale, had tiptoed downstairs again so as not to learn more details. On another occasion he was forced to hear everything. Nana, who had taken a fancy to a baritone singer in a café-concert and had been abandoned by him, decided, in a fit of sentimental melancholy, to commit suicide. She swallowed a glass of water in which she had soaked a handful of matches, and that made her dreadfully ill, but didn't kill her. The count had to look after her and put up with her pouring her heart out to him, interspersed with her tears and her vowing never again to form an attachment with men. Despite her scorn for these pigs, as she called them, she still never managed to remain unattached, but always had some lover round her skirts, going from one infatuation to the next as the perverse tastes of her exhausted body determined. Ever since Zoë had started to make her calculated withdrawal, the management of the house was in such disorder that Muffat did not dare open a door, window, or cupboard. Nothing ran smoothly anymore, men were to be found all over the house bumping into one another. Nowadays he coughed before he went in, having almost surprised the young woman in the arms of Francis one evening when he had left the dressing room for two minutes to tell someone to harness the horses, while the hairdresser was giving Madame a last brush of the hair. There were sudden abandonments behind his back, sexual encounters snatched in odd corners, quickly in her chemise, or in her finery, with the first man she came across. After these stolen pleasures, she would

return to the count, very flushed in the face, but happy. He bored her to tears, with him it was a horrible chore!

In his jealous anguish, the poor man had reached the point of being more at ease when he left Nana and Satin on their own together. To keep the men away, he would have gladly encouraged her in this vice, but even here everything was going downhill. Nana deceived Satin, in the same way as she deceived the count, indulging in wild, outrageous affairs, picking up girls from the gutter. When she was coming back in her cab, she might take a fancy to some slut she had seen on the street, and, her senses fired and imagination excited, she would make her get in her carriage, pay her, and then send her away. Then, disguised as a man, she went to houses of ill repute to see spectacles of debauchery which distracted her in her boredom. And Satin, annoyed at being constantly left, upset the whole house with her terrible scenes. She had ended up having complete dominion over Nana, who held her in respect. Muffat even dreamed of an alliance. When he didn't dare say anything himself, he let Satin loose on her. Twice she had persuaded her darling to take him back, while he was extremely obliging, giving her advice and deferring to her at the least sign of trouble. Only the reconciliation didn't last. Satin was also rather wild. On some days she would go round breaking everything, wearing herself out in fits of love or rage, doing damage to herself, but still pretty and attractive. Zoë presumably was exercising some influence there, for she would corner her as if trying to involve her with her grand scheme, the plan which so far she had mentioned to no one.

However, certain things did still make Comte Muffat angry. He had put up with Satin for some months and in the end had even tolerated unknown men, a whole horde of them scuttling through Nana's bedroom, but he became enraged when he thought he was being deceived by someone of his own class or simply by someone of his acquaintance. When she admitted her relations with Foucarmont, he really suffered, he found this young man's betrayal so abominable that he wanted to challenge him to a duel. As he did not know where to find seconds in such a case, he asked Labordette. The latter was flabbergasted and could not stop laughing.

'A duel over Nana… But, my dear man, the whole of Paris will make fun of you! You can't fight over Nana, that's ridiculous!'

Colour drained from the count's face. He made an angry gesture.

'In that case I'll slap his face in public.'

For an hour Labordette tried to make him see reason. Slapping his face would have a terrible effect. By the evening everyone would know the real cause of the encounter and the press would have a field day. And Labordette always came back to this conclusion:

‘Ridiculous, it’s out of the question!’

Each time he said it, it cut through Muffat like a knife. He couldn’t even fight for the woman he loved; people would have burst out laughing. He had never felt the misery of his love so acutely, his deep-felt passion lost in the frivolous stupidities of pleasure. That was the last time he tried to object. He allowed himself to be persuaded and from then on he put up with the procession of all her intimate friends residing in the house.

Nana devoured their money greedily in a matter of months, one man after another. The increasing demands of her extravagance fomented her appetite, she could clean them out with one bite. First she had Foucarmont, who only lasted a fortnight. His dream was to leave the Navy, he had amassed thirty thousand francs over ten years of voyages and wanted to invest it in the United States. But his instinct for prudence, his meanness even, were thrown to the winds, and he parted with all he had, even signing bills of credit mortgaging his future. By the time Nana threw him out, he was penniless. However, she was not unkind, she advised him to go back to his ship. What was the point of him hanging around? He had no money left so it was no longer feasible. He ought to understand that and be reasonable. A ruined man fell from her hands like a ripe fruit, to lie rotting on the earth.

After that Nana started on Steiner, not with disgust, but not with any affection either. She called him a dirty Jew, as though assuaging an age-old hatred of which she was only dimly aware. He was fat, he was stupid, and she hastened his departure, taking two bites at a time, wanting to get this Prussian over and done with. Steiner had let Simonne go. His business in the Bosphorus began to teeter dangerously and Nana precipitated the ruin with her crazy demands. He battled on for one more month, performing miracles. He covered Europe in a colossal publicity campaign of posters, notices, and prospectuses, and extracted money from far distant countries, but all these louis from the speculators as well as the sous of poor working people disappeared into the black hole of the Avenue de Villiers. He had also formed an association with a man who ran an ironworks in Alsace. There, in a corner of the provinces, were ironworkers whose faces were black with coal dust, soaked in sweat, who night and day strained every

muscle and felt their bones crack as they laboured away to provide Nana with her pleasures. She consumed it all, like an enormous fire, the loot of international banking as well as the hard-won sous of the workers. And this time she really did for Steiner, throwing him out on his ear, sucked dry and so drained that he was incapable of finding anybody else to swindle. When his banking business collapsed, he stuttered and trembled at the thought of the police. He had just been declared bankrupt and any mention of the word ‘money’ terrified him, threw him into a childish fit, this man who had turned over millions. One evening in her house he began to cry. He asked her to lend him a hundred francs to pay his maid. And Nana relented, amused to see such an end to this terrible man who had been fleecing Paris for the last twenty years, and gave it to him saying:

‘I’m giving it to you because I think it’s funny… But listen my dear, you are too old for me to pay your keep. You must look for another job.’

Nana moved on to La Faloise straight away. He had for some time been seeking the honour of being ruined by her, in order to achieve his ultimate goal of man-about-town. That was still out of reach, he needed a woman to launch him. Within two months all of Paris would know who he was and he would be able to read his name in the newspapers. Six weeks would suffice. His inheritance was in property, land, fields, woods, farms. He had to sell quickly, one thing after the other. With each gulp, Nana consumed an acre. The leaves trembling in the sun, the high stalks of ripe corn, the golden vines in September, the tall grass which came up to the cows’ bellies, it all disappeared, swallowed up in the abyss. And even a watercourse, a stone quarry, and three windmills had vanished down the hole. Nana passed like an invading army, like a cloud of locusts blazing through a province and stripping it. She scorched the earth wherever she put her dainty foot. Farm by farm, field by field, she crunched up the inheritance unconcernedly, without even noticing, just as she munched her way through the box of chocolates on her lap. It didn’t matter, it was just sweets. But one night the only thing left was a small wood. She gobbled that up scornfully as if it was hardly worth opening her mouth for. La Faloise laughed his idiotic laugh and sucked the knob on his cane. He was crushed by debt, a hundred francs a year was all he had left, he saw himself forced to return to the country and live with his maniac of an uncle. But it did not matter, he was chic, the *Figaro* had twice published his name. And with his thin neck sticking out above the turned-down edges of his collar, his waist squeezed into a

waistcoat that was too short for him, he swaggered around, screeching like a parrot and putting on a world-weary expression like a wooden puppet who has never felt any real emotion. Nana found him enervating and ended up hitting him.

Meanwhile Fauchery, brought along by his cousin, had returned. The unfortunate Fauchery was now quite the family man. After breaking up with the countess, he found himself in the clutches of Rose who was treating him as though he were her proper husband. Mignon remained simply Madame's major-domo. Established in the position of master of the household, the journalist lied to Rose, taking all sorts of precautions when he was unfaithful to her, full of scruples, just like a model husband who is actually trying to behave himself. Nana's triumph was to have him and consume a newspaper which he had founded with the money from a friend. She did not publicly acknowledge him as her lover, but was pleased to treat him like a gentleman who needs to conceal his movements; and when she spoke of Rose she called her 'poor Rose'. The newspaper provided her with two months' supply of flowers. She worked her way through the subscriptions from the provinces and then everything from the features to the theatre reviews. After that, having exhausted the editorial side and disorganized the management, she realized one of her big dreams, a winter garden in a corner of her house, and that carried off the printing press. Anyway the whole thing was just a joke. When Mignon, happy about the affair, rushed over to find out if he might be able to fix her up with Fauchery on a more permanent basis, she asked if he was joking: a fellow without a penny to his name, making a living from articles and plays? No thank you! That kind of rubbish was all right for a talented woman like poor Rose. And suspicious, fearing some treachery on the part of Mignon who would be very capable of denouncing them to his wife, she got rid of Fauchery who thereafter paid her in publicity alone.

But she remembered him with pleasure, they'd had a good laugh together about that idiot La Faloise. They would perhaps never have thought of renewing their friendship if they hadn't been excited by the pleasure of making fun of that fool. It was like a farce, they kissed under his very nose, had a ball with his money, sending him running on errands all over Paris so they could be on their own. Then when he came back, they made jokes and allusions that he could not possibly understand. One day, encouraged by the journalist, she bet that she would give La Faloise a slap

across the face. That very evening she did so and carried on slapping him; she thought that was funny, it made her happy to show what cowards men were. She called him her ‘punchbag’ and told him to come and get his slap, slaps which made her hand red because she wasn’t used to doing it. La Faloise would laugh feebly, with tears in his eyes. This familiarity delighted him, he thought it was marvellous.

‘You know what,’ he said one evening, very excited after being slapped by her, ‘you should marry me… What about it? We’d make a fine couple!’

It was no empty suggestion. He had planned this marriage on the quiet, being seized with the need to astonish the whole of Paris. Nana’s husband, eh! What about that? How chic was that? A daring apotheosis! But Nana brushed this off very neatly:

‘Me, marry you! Let me tell you if that idea was bothering me, I should have found a husband long ago! And a man who was worth twenty of you, my boy. I’ve received plenty of offers. Listen, apart from you there have been Philippe, Georges, Foucarmont, Steiner, that makes four, not to mention all the others you don’t know. It’s the same old refrain every time. If I’m nice to them, they immediately come out with: “Will you marry me? Will you marry me?” ’

She was getting cross. Then she burst out in indignation:

‘Well, I don’t want to! Do you think I’m made for that sort of thing? Just look at me! I would not be Nana if I lumbered myself with a husband. And besides they revolt me…’

And she spat. She coughed in disgust as if she had seen the filth of the whole earth spreading beneath her.

One evening La Faloise vanished. A week later he was reported to be in the provinces with his uncle, who had a passion for botanizing. He was mounting his specimens for him and hoping for a chance to marry a very ugly and devout cousin. Nana did not in the least regret his going. She just said to the count:

‘Well, that’s one rival less, my little Mufe! You can rejoice today. He was getting serious! He wanted to marry me!’

As he went pale, she put her arms around his neck, laughing, and driving home every one of her cruel remarks with a kiss.

‘That’s right, isn’t it? That’s what gets your goat, isn’t it? You can’t marry Nana! When they are all there pestering me with their “marry me,

marry me”, you are fuming in your corner. It’s not possible for you, you have to wait for your wife to turn up her toes! Oh, if she were giving up the ghost, you’d come running fast enough, throw yourself on the floor, offer me marriage, with sighs, tears, oaths, the whole shebang! That right, darling? It would be so good, wouldn’t it?’

Her tone had softened, she was teasing him with a fierce coaxing. He was very disturbed, and blushed, returning her kisses. Then she cried:

‘My God! Just to think I guessed right! He *has* thought about it! He’s waiting for his wife to croak. Well, well, that’s the last straw, he’s even more of a villain than the others!’

Muffat had put up with the others. Now his last shreds of dignity consisted in remaining ‘Monsieur’ to the servants and friends of the house, the man who, giving her the most, was her official lover. And his passion grew ever more desperate. He was only still there because he paid for it, a high price for everything, her very smiles, and even then being robbed and never getting his money’s worth. But it was like a disease gnawing at him, he couldn’t help suffering from it. When he went into Nana’s bedroom, he made do with opening the windows for a minute to get rid of the malodorous atmosphere where the other men, fair and dark, had been, with their acrid cigar smoke, which choked him. That room became a thoroughfare, with boots constantly being wiped on the doormat; and not a single one was put off by the streak of blood across the threshold. Zoë had become obsessed with this stain; it was the simple fixation of a woman who cared about cleanliness, irritated to see it was still there, but drawn to it nevertheless, and she never entered Madame’s bedroom without remarking:

‘It’s strange but I can’t get that mark out. Yet there are plenty of folk tramping over it.’

Nana, who had received better news of Georges, at present convalescing at Les Fondettes with his mother, always responded:

‘Oh, give it time. It’ll fade underfoot.’

And it was true that each of the gentlemen, Foucarmont, Steiner, La Faloise and Fauchery, had taken away a bit of the stain on the soles of their shoes. And Muffat—who, like Zoë, was preoccupied with the streak—could not help seeing, as it got pinker and pinker, the tally of men who came and went. He was secretly afraid of it, he always stepped over it in a

sudden fear of crushing something that seemed alive, a bare limb spread out on the floor.

Then in that room his head would start spinning. He would forget everything, the hordes of men coming through, the sign of death in the doorway. Outside sometimes, in the fresh air on the street, he would weep with shame and disgust, swearing he'd never go back. But as soon as the door curtain closed behind him, he was again a captive, he felt himself dissolving in the warmth of the room, his flesh suffused with her perfume and the voluptuous desire for self-annihilation. Devout, and used to the ecstasies he had experienced in opulent churches, he relived the exact sensations he'd had when as a believer he would kneel beneath a stained-glass window and succumb to the rapture of the organ music and incense. The woman possessed him with the jealous despotism of a wrathful God, terrifying him, giving him spasmodic seconds of acute joy for hours of agony, visions of hell and eternal torment. He mumbled the same halting words, with the same prayers and the same despair, and especially with the same humility, as that of a damned creature crushed beneath the clay of his earthly origins. His male desires and his spiritual needs mingled and seemed to spring from the dark depths of his being, as though they were a single flowering from the trunk of his life. He abandoned himself to those two levers that will move the world, the power of love and the power of faith. And always, in spite of the struggles of his reason, Nana's bedroom maddened him and he succumbed with a shudder to the overwhelming power of sex, just as his being was effaced before the unknown vastness of the heavens.

So when she realized he was so abject, Nana grew more triumphant, more tyrannical. Instinctively she indulged a frenzied desire to abase him. It was not enough to destroy things, she soiled them too. Her delicate fingers left repulsive marks, putrefying everything she had broken. And he, like a fool, played along with it, with the vague memory of saints who had been devoured by fleas and eaten their own excrement. Once she had him in her room with the doors locked, she revelled in the ignominy of men. First they had made a joke of it, she hit him a little, imposed odd desires, made him lisp like a baby, repeat what she said last.

'Say after me: "Diddums doethn't like it!" '

He was docile even to the point of imitating her accent.

'Diddums doethn't like it!'

Or else she would get down on all fours in her chemise on her fur rugs, prowling around and growling, as though she wanted to eat him. And she would even give his calves a nip just for fun. Then she would get up again:

‘Your turn now to be a bear… I bet you won’t be such a good bear as me.’

It was still charming. He enjoyed her pretending to be a bear, with her white skin and chestnut mane. He laughed, he went down on all fours too and growled while she scuttled away from him pretending to be scared.

‘Aren’t we silly?’ she said afterwards. ‘You don’t know what a sight you are, my pet! Oh, if they could only see you in the Tuileries!’

But these little games soon turned sour. Not that she became cruel, for she wasn’t a bad girl at heart; it was like a wind of madness which passed through and gradually grew stronger in the enclosed bedroom. They were maddened by sex, thrown into the delirious imaginations of the flesh. The old religious terrors of their sleepless night were turning now into a thirst for bestiality, a frantic desire for getting down on all fours, grunting and biting. Then one day when he was pretending to be the bear, she gave him such a shove that he fell against a piece of furniture. And she burst out in involuntary laughter when she saw he had a bump on his forehead. From then on, having a taste for it because of her former attacks on La Faloise, she treated him like an animal, following him around the room, kicking and beating him.

‘Giddy up there, giddy up! You’re a horse. Get up there, you filthy nag, walk!’

At other times he was a dog. She threw her scented handkerchief to the end of the room and he had to run after it and pick it up in his teeth, dragging himself along on his hands and knees.

‘Bring it back, César! And be quick about it or you’ll be sorry! Good dog, César, well done, nice dog, now ask for it nicely!’

And he loved this humiliation, relished the pleasure of being an animal. He wanted to go even further, he shouted:

‘Beat me harder, woof! woof! I’m a mad dog, give me a thrashing!’

On a whim she demanded that he come one evening in all his finery as chamberlain. How she giggled and ridiculed him when she had him in his regalia complete with sword, hat, white breeches, and red tail-coat trimmed with gold, bearing the symbolic key worn hanging on the skirt on his left

side. This key especially tickled her, and set her off on her fantasies, with a stream of lewd remarks. Still laughing, carried away by her disrespect for high office and the delight in debasing him wearing this ceremonial garb, she shook him, pinched him, saying things like ‘Come on, Chamberlain’, and repeatedly kicking him up the backside the while. And so doing, she was also wholeheartedly administering these kicks to the residents of the Tuileries enthroned in majesty in the imperial court and lording it over a fearful and crushed population. That’s what she thought of society people! It was her revenge, an unconscious family rancour in her blood. Then once the Chamberlain had got his clothes off and his costume was spread out on the floor, she yelled at him to jump on it, and he jumped; she yelled at him to spit at it, and he spat; she yelled at him to trample all over the gold, over the eagles, over the decorations, and he did so. And suddenly there was nothing left, everything was ruined. She smashed up her Chamberlain just as if she was breaking a scent bottle or a sweet dish, and trashed it, made of it a pile of dirt to be thrown in the gutter.

Meanwhile the goldsmiths had not kept their word, the bed was not delivered until about the middle of January. At that time Muffat was in Normandy, where he had gone to sell a last remaining scrap of land. Nana had demanded four thousand francs instantly. He was only supposed to return the following day, but having concluded his transaction, he put forward his return and without even calling at the Rue Mirosmesnil he went to the Avenue de Villiers. It was striking ten. As he had a key to a small door opening on to the Rue Cardinet, he went quickly up. Upstairs in the salon Zoë, who was polishing the brasses, was taken aback to see him. And not knowing how to stop him going any further, she began to tell him in a long-winded fashion that Monsieur Venot, looking extremely upset, had been searching for him since the day before, that he had already been twice to beg her to send Monsieur back to his own house if Monsieur arrived at Madame’s house first. Muffat heard her out, not understanding what she was talking about, and then noticed she seemed agitated; and suddenly overwhelmed by a jealous rage of a kind he did not realize he was still capable of, he threw himself at the bedroom door where he could hear people laughing. The double door gave, the two wings fell open, and Zoë withdrew with a shrug. Too bad! Since Madame was going off her head, Madame must sort it out the best she could.

And Muffat on the threshold gave a loud cry at what he saw before his eyes:

‘God, Oh God!’

The new bedroom dazzled the beholder in its royal splendour. Silver buttons sparkled like stars on the tea-rose velvet of the curtains, with that flesh pink that the sky has on certain evenings when Venus lights up on the horizon, against the clear background of the dying daylight. The gold cords that hung from the corners, the golden lace surrounding the panels, were like little flames of chestnut hair tumbling down, half covering the great bare room, setting off its voluptuous pallor. Then, opposite, was the gold and silver bed which shone with the newly polished carvings, a throne big enough for Nana to stretch out her beautiful naked limbs; an altar of Byzantine luxury worthy of the omnipotence of her sex which she was even now displaying to the world, an immodest, divine, awe-inspiring idol. And beside her, the goddess triumphant, below the snowy gleam of her breast, sprawled a disgrace, a decrepit specimen, a comical and lamentable ruin of a man, the Marquis de Chouard in his underclothes.

The count clasped his hands together. He shuddered from head to toe and repeated:

‘My God, my God!’

It was for the Marquis de Chouard that the golden roses bloomed on the side of the bed, sprigs of golden roses opening in their golden foliage; it was for him that the cherubs were leaning over, frolicking around on a silver trellis with their amorous youthful laughter; and at his feet that the Faun was uncovering for him the sleeping nymph, weary of fleshly pleasure, that figure of Night copied from the famous naked Nana, recognizable to everyone by her very ample rear. Flung down there like a human rag, spoiled and dissolute from sixty years of debauchery, he brought a whiff of the charnel house into the glory of the woman’s dazzling flesh. When he saw the door open, he sat up, seized with the terror of a decrepit old man. This last night of love had rendered him stupid once more, he had fallen into his second childhood. And lost for words, half paralysed, stammering, trembling, he remained there, poised as if to escape, his vest rucked up over his skeletal body, one leg outside the covers, one poor livid leg covered in grey hairs. In spite of her crossness, Nana could not stop laughing.

‘Lie down, get under the bedclothes,’ she said pushing him back and burying him under the sheet, like something dirty she wished to hide.

And she jumped up and shut the door. How unlucky was that, with her little Mufe? He always turned up at the wrong time. So why did he have to go and get money from Normandy? The old man had brought her four thousand francs and she had just let him do what he wanted. She pushed back the double doors and yelled:

‘It’s too bad! It’s your fault! Why did you have to come in like that? That’s enough! Get lost!’

Muffat stood there behind the closed door, thunderstruck by what he had just witnessed. His shaking grew more violent, a shiver that ascended from his legs up to his chest and into his skull. Then like a tree shaken by the wind, he teetered and fell to his knees, all his limbs cracking. And with his hands held out in despair, he stammered:

‘It’s too much, oh, my God, it’s too much.’

He had put up with everything, but now no more, he was at the end of his tether, in the black hole where a man’s reason fails. And, in an extraordinary surge of faith, with his hands held higher still, he sought heaven, he called upon God.

‘Oh no, I can’t bear it! Oh, come down my God and help me! Let me die instead! O God, not this man! It’s over, take me, carry me away, let me see no more, let me feel no more. O God, I am Thine! Our Father which art in heaven…’

And so, burning with faith, he continued and an ardent prayer rose from his lips. But someone touched his shoulder. He raised his eyes, it was Monsieur Venot, surprised to find him praying outside this closed door. Then, as though God Himself had answered his call, the count threw his arms round the little old man’s neck. At last he could give way to tears, he sobbed, crying over and over:

‘My brother… My brother…’

All his suffering humanity found consolation in this cry. He soaked Monsieur Venot’s face in his tears, he embraced him, stammering:

‘Oh, my brother, how I suffer! You are all I have left, brother… Take me, take me away for ever, I beg you, take me!’

Then Monsieur Venot clasped him to his breast, calling him his brother too. But there was a fresh blow in store. He had been looking for him since

the day before to tell him that Comtesse Sabine, in a supreme act of madness, had run off with the buyer from a big draper's shop, a terrible scandal which the whole of Paris was already gossiping about. When he saw him under the influence of such religious exultation, he sensed the moment might be favourable and told him straight away about the affair, this tragically banal end to his disintegrating household. The count wasn't in the least affected by this. His wife had left, that didn't mean anything, they would see about it later. And seized with anguish again, looking at the door, the walls, the ceiling with a look of terror, he still had only this one plea:

'Take me away… I have reached the end of my strength… Take me away.'

Monsieur Venot led him away like a child. From that moment on, he was his and his alone. Muffat reverted to the strict practices of his religion. His life was turned upside down. Confronted with the disgust and respectability of the Tuileries, he had offered his resignation as chamberlain. Estelle, his daughter, was suing him for a sum of sixty thousand francs, the money from an aunt that she should have inherited on her marriage. Ruined, living frugally on the trifling remains of his huge fortune, he allowed himself to be finished off by the countess, who was consuming the leftovers that Nana had scorned. It was Sabine who, corrupted by the promiscuity of that courtesan, and pushed to extremes, caused the decay and final breakdown of the family home. After several affairs, she went back to him and he accepted her in the spirit of resignation and Christian forgiveness. She was the constant living reminder of his shame. But he grew more and more indifferent to these things and no longer suffered from them. Heaven took him out of the arms of woman to place him into the arms of God. It was a prolonging of the pleasures with Nana into the sphere of religion, with the stammering, prayers and despair, the humility of a damned creature crushed beneath the clay of his origins. At the backs of churches, his knees ice-cold on the flagstones, he rediscovered his old pleasures, the spasms of his muscles and the delicious thrilling of his mind in the same satisfaction of the obscure needs of his being.

The evening of the breaking-off of relations, Mignon arrived at the Avenue de Villiers. He was getting used to having Fauchery around, in the end he had found hundreds of advantages in him being the husband in his wife's home, leaving him to do little things round the house, relying on him

for the active supervision of the household, using the money earned from his theatrical successes on the daily expenditure of the house. And since, on the other hand, Fauchery turned out to be sensible and not stupidly jealous, but just as accommodating as Mignon himself with regard to Rose's other activities, the two men got on better and better, happy in their fruitful association, in pleasures of all sorts, each establishing his own place next to the other in a ménage where they were no longer embarrassed to be together. It was all in order, it worked very well, they vied with each other to ensure total harmony. And now Mignon had come, on Fauchery's advice, to see if he could not tempt her maidservant away from Nana, since the journalist had formed a high opinion of Zoë's intelligence. Rose was distressed, for the last month she had only been able to find inexperienced servants who made life difficult for her. When Zoë answered the door, Mignon ushered her immediately into the dining room. At his first words she smiled: it was impossible, she was leaving Madame's service and setting up her own business. And she added with an air of modest pride that she received offers every day, the ladies were fighting over her, Madame Blanche had promised her a fortune to get her back. Zoë was taking over La Tricon's establishment; it was an old project she had been thinking over for a long time, into which she was putting her savings and hoping to make some money. She was full of grandiose ideas, she wanted to enlarge the business, rent a big house, and provide all sorts of amenities. It was with this in mind as well that she had tried to employ Satin—the poor stupid child was in such a bad state, in hospital, on her last legs.

Since Mignon was going on about the risks you ran in commerce, Zoë, without making it clear what the nature of her establishment would be, gave a tight-lipped smile, as if she had a boiled sweet in her mouth, and said merely:

'Oh, the luxury market is always successful. I've been in other people's houses for such a long time, you see, now I want other folk to be in my house.'

And her lips curled fiercely, she would at last be 'Madame' and for a few hundred francs she could lord it over all those women whose slops she had been emptying for the last fifteen years.

Mignon asked to be announced and Zoë left him for a moment, after saying that Madame had had a dreadful day. He had only been here once and wasn't familiar with the house. The dining room with its Gobelins

tapestries, its dresser, and its silver astonished him. He casually opened all the doors, inspected the salon, the winter garden, returned to the hall. And this overwhelming luxury, the gilded furniture, the silk and velvet hangings filled him gradually with an admiration which made his heart race. When Zoë came down to take him upstairs, she offered to show him the other rooms, the dressing room, the bedroom. Then in the bedroom, Mignon's feelings knew no bounds; he was beside himself, ecstatic, deeply moved. He was a connoisseur of these things but this damned woman Nana astounded him. In the midst of the devastation of the house, in the trashing of it all by the servants, there were still riches in plenty stuffing up the holes and flowing out over the ruins. And Mignon, faced with this magisterial monument, was reminded of some major public works he had seen. Near Marseilles he had been shown an aqueduct whose stone arches were built over an abyss, a cyclopean monument that had cost millions as well as ten years of hard labour. In Cherbourg he had seen the new port, an immense building site, hundreds of men sweating in the sun, machines filling up the sea with great slabs of rock, erecting a great wall where sometimes workers were lost in a bloody pulp. But all this seemed insignificant to him, Nana's achievement much greater. And seeing her work, he again felt that respect that he had felt on a night of celebration in the chateau built by a sugar-refiner, a palace whose royal splendour had been paid for by one commodity alone—sugar. With Nana it had been something different, a tiny, shameful thing that people had made fun of, part of her delicate nakedness, but so powerful that it could move the world, that all alone without workers or machines invented by engineers she had just turned Paris upside down and built this fortune over dead bodies.

'Oh, good heavens! What an instrument!' Mignon couldn't help exclaiming in his rapture and remembering his personal gratitude.

Nana had little by little fallen into deep despondency. At first the encounter between the marquis and the count had shaken her like a nervous fever, which was almost a kind of gaiety. Then the thought of this old man going off in a cab, half dead, and her 'poor Mufe' whom she would see no more after making him so mad, brought on the beginnings of a sentimental melancholy. Then she had got angry when she learned that Satin was sick and had vanished a fortnight ago and was in the process of dying in Lariboisière,* Madame Robert having reduced her to a wretched state. As she was ordering the horses to go and see this little slut once more, Zoë

came up calmly to give her a week's notice. She was in despair. It seemed she was losing one of the family. Oh God, however would she manage on her own? And she pleaded with Zoë who, very flattered by Madame's reaction, ended up embracing her to show her that she was not going because she was cross, she had to go, she had to put her business sense above her feelings. But that day was the day of bad news. Nana, very upset and no longer intending to go out, was wandering aimlessly round her small salon when Labordette, who had come up to tell her about a possibility of acquiring some magnificent lace, happened to mention quite incidentally that Georges was dead. Her blood froze.

'Zizi dead!' she cried.

And her eyes had involuntarily gone to the pink mark on the carpet. But it had finally disappeared, the feet had worn it away. Meanwhile Labordette was filling in the details. People didn't know exactly what had happened, some people were saying it was a wound which had reopened, others that it was suicide, that the boy had dived into a pool at Les Fondettes. Nana kept saying, over and over:

'Dead! Dead!'

She'd had a lump in her throat all morning and now burst out sobbing, which relieved her feelings. She was overwhelmed by an infinite sadness, something profound and immense. Labordette wanted to comfort her about Georges, but she motioned him to be quiet, stammering:

'It's not just him, it's everything, everything… Oh, how unhappy I am… Oh, I know, they'll still say that I'm a bitch, with his mother grieving over there and that poor man groaning outside my door this morning and the others who have been ruined now that they've spent all their money on me… That's right, blame Nana, blame that animal! Oh, I can take it, I can hear them as if I were there… That dirty whore who sleeps with everybody, who ruins some and kills others, and who makes so many people very sad…'

She had to break off, choked by tears, and in her anguish she threw herself on to a divan and buried her head in a cushion. The misfortune she felt around her, the misery she had caused, drowned her in a warm and unending flood of feeling. And her voice tailed off into a wail just like a little girl's.

‘Oh, it hurts, it hurts so much, I can’t breathe… It’s too hard not to be understood, to see everyone siding against you because they are stronger than you… But when you’ve got nothing to blame yourself for, when you have a clear conscience, no… no…’

Her anger was becoming more defiant. She got up and dried her eyes and walked agitatedly round the room.

‘Well, they can say what they like, it’s not my fault! Am I wicked? Am I? I give away all I’ve got, I wouldn’t hurt a fly… It’s them, it’s them! I never wanted to be nasty to them but they were hanging on my skirts! And now they are all dying on me, and begging in the street and acting desperate, the lot of them…’

Then, stopping in front of Labordette, and tapping him on the shoulder:

‘Look, you were here. Tell me the truth. Am I the one who drove them to it? Weren’t there a dozen of them falling over themselves to invent the filthiest thing we could do? Well, they disgusted me! I did all I could not to copy them, they frightened me. Listen, I’ll give you one example: they all wanted to marry me. What a dreadful idea! Yes, my dear, I could have been a countess or baroness twenty times over if I had said yes. Well, I said no because I had some sense. Oh, when I think of all the crimes and dirty deeds I spared them! They would have robbed, murdered, killed their fathers and mothers for me. I only had to say the word, and I didn’t say that word. And now look how I’m rewarded. It’s like that Daguenet, I arranged his marriage; a good-for-nothing, I set him up after I’d kept him for free for several weeks. Yesterday I met him and he cut me dead. Go to hell then, you swine! I am cleaner than you are!’

She had started to pace round the room again, she brought her fist down hard on a side table.

‘For God’s sake! It’s not fair, society is all wrong. They come down on women when it’s the men who order us around. Look, I can say that to you now. When I went with them I didn’t enjoy it, no not at all. It really bored me, I swear! So I ask you, is it my fault, all this? Oh yes, they bored me rigid! If it hadn’t been for them, my dear, if it hadn’t been for what they made me into, I should be in a convent praying to the good Lord, for I’ve always been religious. And dammit, if they sacrificed their money or their lives, it’s their fault! I’m not to blame!’

‘Of course not,’ said Labordette, with conviction.

Zoë ushered in Mignon, Nana received him with a smile. She had had her bout of crying and now it was over. Still warmly enthusiastic, he complimented her on what she had done to the house. But she let it be seen that she'd had enough of her house now and had other plans. She would get rid of it all one of these days. Then he gave a pretext for his visit, talking about a performance in aid of old Bosc who was stuck in an armchair, paralysed, and she was extremely sympathetic and bought two boxes from him. Then, as Zoë said that Madame's cab was waiting, she asked for her hat. And tying the ribbons she told them about poor Satin, and added:

'I'm going to the hospital… Nobody loved me like she did. Oh, we are right to accuse men of having no feelings! Who knows? She might not be there when I go. Never mind, I shall ask to see her. I want to kiss her.'

Labordette and Mignon were smiling. She had cheered up and was smiling too; they didn't count, that pair, they understood. And both men admired her in contemplative silence while she finished buttoning up her gloves. She stood alone in the midst of the piles of riches in her house with a whole host of men laid low at her feet. Like those monsters of old whose fearsome domains were littered in bones, she was treading on skulls. And she was surrounded by catastrophes, the furious burning of Vandeuvres, the melancholy of Foucarmont lost in the South China seas, the disaster of Steiner reduced to living a life of respectability, the smug imbecility of La Faloise and the tragic collapse of the Muffats, the pale corpse of Georges watched over by Philippe who had been released from prison the day before. Her work of ruin and death was over, the fly had flown off the dung heap of the faubourgs, bringing with it the ferment of social decay, and poisoning these men simply by alighting on them. It was good, it was just, she had avenged her own people, the beggars and the outcasts. And while sex rose triumphant in her and shone upon her prostrate victims like a rising sun lighting up a field of carnage, she remained as unconscious of it as a proud animal, ignorant of what she had wrought, always kind at heart. She was still a child, plump and strong, healthy and cheerful as ever. None of it counted now. Her house seemed ridiculous to her, too small, full of furniture that got in her way. It was trivial, she had to start over again. So she dreamed of something better; and, dressed in all her finery, clean, strong, and looking quite new, as though she had never been used, she set off to give Satin one last kiss.

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CHAPTER 14

SUDDENLY Nana disappeared from view: she went under again, she fled, she took off to strange places. Before she left she had endured a stressful sale of the mansion, throwing out everything, including the furniture, jewels, fine clothes, and linen. Figures were bandied about, in the five days of the auction she had made more than six hundred thousand francs. Paris had seen her perform in a *féerie** for the last time: *Mélusine* at the Théâtre de la Gaîté, which the penniless Bordenave had in a bold move somehow managed to lay his hands on. Here she met up with Prullière and Fontan again, her role being a simple walk-on, non-speaking part, consisting of three *poses plastiques* as a female spirit, powerful and mute, but a real draw nonetheless. Then in the midst of this fantastic success when Bordenave, mad about publicity, was lighting up Paris with his colossal posters, they learned one fine morning that she had probably left for Cairo the day before; a simple dispute with the producer, something he had said which had displeased her, the sudden impulse of a woman who was too rich to be bothered with such things. Anyway, it was her latest passion: she had dreamt for ages of going to Turkey.

Months went by. She was forgotten. When her name was mentioned amongst the ladies and gentlemen of her acquaintance, the strangest stories circulated, everybody gave conflicting and fantastic information. She had won the heart of a viceroy, she lived deep in the precincts of a palace reigning over two hundred slaves whose throats she cut for her amusement. No, that wasn’t the case at all, she had ruined herself with a huge Negro, a sordid affair that had left her without a penny to her name, wallowing in the debauched squalor of Cairo. Two weeks later there was universal astonishment when someone swore they had encountered her in Russia. A legend was being created; she was the mistress of a prince, they talked of her diamonds. Before long every woman knew what kind they were, from the descriptions that were rife, without anyone being able to quote the precise source: rings, earrings, bracelets, a diamond necklace an inch wide, a royal diadem mounted with a central jewel as thick as your thumb. At that remove in those far-away lands, she assumed the mysterious glamour of an

idol laden with precious stones. Nowadays when her name was mentioned, it was with a reverential respect for the fortune she had acquired in the land of the barbarians.

One July evening towards eight, Lucy, who was riding down the Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré in her cab, saw Caroline Héquet who had come out on foot to order something from a supplier in the neighbourhood. She called to her and immediately asked:

‘Have you had dinner? Are you free? Oh, do come over, my dear, Nana’s back!’

The other woman climbed up into the cab without delay. Lucy went on:

‘And do you know in the time we are chatting, she may be dead already!’

‘Dead! What are you saying?’ cried Caroline, flabbergasted. ‘But where? What of?’

‘At the Grand Hôtel. From smallpox… Oh, it’s quite a story!’*

Lucy told her coachman to go as fast as he could. So while the horses trotted at a lick down the Rue Royale and the boulevards, she breathlessly gave her an account of Nana’s exploits.

‘You wouldn’t believe it… Nana came back from Russia, I don’t know why, quarrelled with her prince I suppose… She left her luggage at the station and stayed with her aunt, do you remember that old woman? Well, Nana saw her child who had smallpox, he died the next day, and she came to blows with the aunt about the money she was supposed to have sent her and of which the aunt hasn’t had a sou. That was the reason the child died, apparently. Well anyway, he was abandoned and neglected… So then, Nana goes off to some hotel or other, bumps into Mignon just as she was thinking about getting her luggage… She comes over all queer, starts shivering and feels sick, and Mignon takes her back to the room, promising to look after her things… What do you think, isn’t it strange how things turn out! But here’s the best bit: Rose finds out about Nana’s illness, flies into a rage at her being on her own in furnished rooms and rushes over in floods of tears to look after her… Well, you remember how much they loathed one another —two real Furies! Well, my dear, Rose had Nana taken to the Grand Hôtel so that at least she could die in a smart place and she’s already been there three nights, at death’s door. It was Labordette who told me. So I wanted to see…’

‘Yes, yes,’ Caroline intervened, very excited. ‘We’ll go up and see her.’

They had arrived. On the boulevard the coachman had been obliged to hold his horses amid the logjam of cabs and pedestrians. During the day the Legislative Body had voted for war.* Crowds were thronging every street, flowing along the pavements, spilling out on to the road. In the direction of the Madeleine the sun had set behind a blood-red cloud and its blazing reflection lit up the tall windows. Dusk was falling, a heavy, melancholy time of day with the avenues already fading into the dark, not yet pierced by the bright flames of the gas jets. And among these people on the move, faint voices in the distance got louder, eyes gleamed in pale faces, and all were swept along on waves of bewilderment and anxiety.

‘There’s Mignon,’ said Lucy. ‘He’ll tell us if there’s any news.’

Mignon was standing under the huge entrance of the Grand Hôtel, looking nervous and watching the crowds. At Lucy’s first question he fired up, shouting:

‘How do I know! I haven’t been able to get Rose down from up there for the last two days. How stupid to go risking your life like that! She will look terrible if she gets through it, with pockmarks all over her face! What will happen to us then?’

This thought that Rose’s beauty might be lost exasperated him. He was abandoning Nana entirely, not understanding women and their silly loyalties. But Fauchery was crossing the boulevard and when he reached them, worried as they were, he asked for news. Each man urged the other to go up and see. They were on very familiar terms now.

‘There’s no change, my boy,’ Mignon declared. ‘You should go up, you could make her come down.’

‘Huh, you’re a good one, I must say,’ said the journalist. ‘Why not go up yourself?’

Then, as Lucy asked for the room number, they begged her to make Rose come down, or they would be very angry. But Lucy and Caroline didn’t go up straight away. They had seen Fontan with his hands in his pockets, wandering round, very entertained by the faces of the crowd. When he learned that Nana was upstairs ill, he said, pretending to be concerned:

‘Poor girl! I’ll go and say hello. What’s the matter with her?’

‘Smallpox,’ answered Mignon.

The actor had already taken a step towards the courtyard, but he shuddered and came back again:

‘Oh, shit!’

Smallpox was no joke. Fontan had almost caught it when he was five years old. Mignon told a tale about one of his nieces who had died of it. As for Fauchery, he still had the marks from it, three spots on the bridge of his nose, which he pointed out to them. And as Mignon was urging him again to go up, on the pretext that nobody could catch it twice, he violently argued with this theory, citing cases and saying doctors were ignorant fools. But Lucy and Caroline interrupted, surprised by the growing crowds.

‘Just look! Just look! What a lot of people!’

Night was creeping on, the gaslights in the distance were gradually lighting up, one by one. Meanwhile you could see curious people at their windows, while under the trees the human stream swelled minute by minute in an enormous flood from the Madeleine to the Bastille. The cabs were driving slowly along the streets.

A low murmur rose from this dense mass who, still quite subdued, had taken to the streets through a need to be together, and were now tramping along, burning with a common fever. But a commotion forced them back. Barging through the groups of people jostling one another to make way for them, a troop of men in helmets and white smocks had appeared, chanting steadily like a hammer falling on an anvil:

‘To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!’

And the crowd watched, initially with sullen distrust, but were soon persuaded and moved by these heroic images, as at a march-past of a military band.

‘Yes, go on, go and get your heads blown off,’ muttered Mignon, unmoved.

But Fontan thought it was all very fine, he talked about joining up. When the enemy was at the gates, every citizen should rise up and defend their country. And he struck the pose of Bonaparte at Austerlitz.*

‘Come on, are you coming up with us?’ Lucy enquired.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I might catch something.’

Outside the Grand Hôtel on a bench, a man was hiding his face in a handkerchief. When he arrived, Fauchery had indicated him to Mignon with a wink. And he was still there, yes, still there. The journalist pointed him

out to the two women with a nudge. As he looked up, they recognized him and uttered an exclamation. It was Comte Muffat, his gaze directed at one of the windows.

‘He’s been in that position ever since this morning, you know,’ Mignon said. ‘I saw him there at six, and he hasn’t moved since. The moment Labordette started to spread the word, he came here with his kerchief over his face. Every half-hour he shuffles over and asks if the person upstairs is any better and then goes back and sits down again. Say what you like, that bedroom is not a healthy place. It’s all very well to be fond of people but you don’t want to risk your life, do you?’

The count with his eyes raised did not seem to notice what was going on around him. No doubt he was unaware that war had been declared, did not see or hear the crowds.

‘Well!’ said Fauchery. ‘There he is, just watch!’

And indeed the count had left the bench and was walking through the high gateway. But the concierge, who had got to know him by now, did not leave him time to ask his question. He said brusquely:

‘She died a moment ago, Monsieur.’

Nana dead! It was a dreadful blow for everyone. Muffat, without a word, had gone back to his bench, his face in his kerchief. The rest uttered loud exclamations. But their words were cut short by another group going by yelling:

‘To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!’

Nana dead! And such a beautiful girl! Mignon sighed in relief. Rose would come downstairs at last. A chill fell over the company. Fontan, who had been always dreaming of a tragic role, had put on an expression of grief, with the corners of his mouth turned down and his eyes rolling, while Fauchery, who was truly moved in spite of his journalistic cynicism, chewed nervously on his cigar. Meanwhile the two women were still exclaiming about it. The last time Lucy had seen her was in the Gaîté; Blanche too, in *Mélusine*. Oh, she was amazing, darling, when she appeared out of that crystal grotto! The gentlemen remembered very well. Fontan was playing Prince Cocorico. And once they started reminiscing, no end of things came to mind. In the crystal grotto, how elegant she looked with that lovely figure of hers! She didn’t speak, the authors had even cut her only line, because it was unnecessary. No, she didn’t say a word but it was all the

more impressive like that. She held the audience captive simply by appearing on stage. A body such as you would not set eyes on again, shoulders, legs, waist! How strange that she should be dead! All she had on over her *juste-au-corps** was a simple gold waistband which scarcely concealed her down below, either front or back. Around her was the shining grotto made of glass. Cascades of diamonds poured down, white pearl necklaces rippled among the stalactites of the arch. And in that transparent spring water traversed by a wide electric ray, with her skin and her flame-coloured hair, she looked like a golden sun. Paris would always remember her like that, glittering in the centre of the crystal, high in the air, like the Blessed Lord. No, it was just too stupid to go and die on everybody when you were in a situation like that! *Now* what would she be looking like in that upstairs room!

‘And that pleasure gone for good!’ said Mignon in a melancholy voice, as a man who does not care to see a good or useful thing wasted.

He sounded out Lucy and Caroline to find out whether they were going to go up just the same. Of course they were. Their curiosity had increased. At that moment Blanche arrived out of breath, exasperated with the crowd blocking the pavements. And when she heard the news, the exclamations began again, the ladies made for the staircase with a great swishing of skirts. Mignon followed, shouting after them:

‘Tell Rose I’m waiting for her… And tell her to hurry up.’

‘Nobody knows if one should fear infection at the beginning or at the end,’ Fontan was explaining to Fauchery. ‘A young doctor friend of mine even told me that the hours following death are the most dangerous. Miasmas come out of… Oh, I’m so sorry about this sudden end, I would have been so glad to shake hands with her one last time.’

‘But now what’s the point?’ said the journalist.

‘Yes, what’s the point?’ the others echoed.

The crowd was steadily growing. In the light of the shops under the dancing flames of gas, you could see the two streams of people along the pavements, their hats bobbing. And now the excitement was spreading, people were running after the men in white smocks, in a continual surge they were swept along the street. And the cry went up from every throat, staccato and insistent:

‘To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!’

The room up on the fourth floor cost twelve francs a day, Rose wanted something decent but not luxurious, because you don't need luxury when you are suffering. Hung with Louis XIII cretonne in a huge floral design, the room, like all hotels, had mahogany furniture, and a red carpet with a pattern of black leaves. A heavy silence reigned, broken by loud whisperings from the corridor.

'I tell you we're going the wrong way. The boy said to turn right… What a barracks of a place this is!'

'Wait a moment, let's have a look… Room 401, room 401…'

'Ha, this way… 405, 403…This must be it… Ah at last, 401! Here we are, shh! Shh!'

The voices stopped. Someone coughed and they were quiet for a moment. Then, opening the door slowly, Lucy went in, followed by Caroline and Blanche. But they halted, there were already five women in the room. Gaga was reclining on the only easy chair, a red velvet *voltaire*.* By the fireplace, Simonne and Clarisse were chatting to Léa de Horn, sitting on an upright chair, while in front of the bed to the left of the door, Rose Mignon, perched on a wooden trunk, had her eyes fixed on the corpse half hidden in the shadow of the curtains. They all had their hats and gloves on as though they were ladies visiting. And she was the only one with her gloves off, and hair down, pale with the fatigue of three nights' vigil, stunned and grief-stricken at this sudden death. On the corner of the chest of drawers a shaded lamp threw a bright light on Gaga.

'Oh, how awful,' muttered Lucy, catching hold of Rose's hand. 'We wanted to say goodbye to her.'

And she moved her head round in an attempt to see her but the lamp was too far away and she did not dare pull it nearer. Lying on the bed was a grey lump, nothing was visible except a red chignon and a white patch which must be the face. Lucy added:

'I haven't seen her since she was at the back of the grotto in the Gaîté…'

At this, Rose, recovering from her stupor, smiled and repeated:

'Oh, she's not the same, she's not the same…'

Then she sank back into contemplation, without moving or speaking. The three women joined the others in front of the fireplace; perhaps they would be able to look at the body in a little while. In hushed tones Simonne and Clarisse discussed the dead girl's diamonds. Did they even exist, those

diamonds? Nobody had seen them, was it all a joke? But Léa de Horn knew someone who had seen them—oh colossal, they were! And that wasn't all. She had brought back a lot of other fine things from Russia, embroidered cloths, precious ornaments, a table service in gold, and even some pieces of furniture. Yes, my dears, fifty-two packages, some enormous boxes, enough to fill three wagons, all of it still at the station. Well, how unlucky was that, to have died without even having time to unpack everything; and don't forget she had money as well, something like a million. Lucy asked who would inherit. Distant relatives, the aunt probably. A bit of a shock for the old girl. She didn't know about it yet, Nana had insisted that she should not be told of her illness, as she was still bitter about her little boy's death. Then they all grew sentimental about the little boy, remembering when they had seen him at the races: a very sickly looking child, like a sad old man; well, he was one of those poor kids that didn't ask to be born.

'He's happier under the ground,' said Blanche.

'And so is she,' Caroline added. 'Life's not all it's cracked up to be.'

Black thoughts overwhelmed them in this gloomy bedroom. They were scared, it was silly to spend so much time there chatting. But the need to see her kept them rooted to the spot. It was very hot, and in the humid darkness swamping the room the glass lampshade cast a ring like a moon on the ceiling. Under the bed a bowl full of phenol gave off a stale odour. And from time to time a breath of air lifted the curtains at the window which opened on to the boulevard, from where a distant roaring could be heard.

'Did she suffer a lot?' Lucy asked, fascinated by the decoration on the clock, the three smiling Graces, dancing.

Gaga appeared to wake up.

'Oh yes, you bet she did! I was there when she passed away. It wasn't a pretty sight, I can tell you. She made a great shudder…'

But she was unable to carry on with her explanation—a cry went up:

'To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!'

And Lucy, needing some air, opened the window wide and leaned out. There it was pleasant, the night cool under the starry sky. Opposite her some windows were lit up and reflections of the gas lamps danced in the golden letters on the shop signs. Down on the street it was very entertaining, you could see floods of people, like a river, flowing along the pavements and the roads in amongst the mêlée of carriages, great moving

shadows in which lanterns and gas lamps sparkled and shone. But the rowdy band coming past had torches. A red glow was coming from the Madeleine, cutting through the crowds with a train of fire, spreading out in the distance over their heads like a sheet of flame. Lucy called to Blanche and Caroline, forgetting where she was and shouting:

‘Come over here… You can see really well from this window.’

All three leaned out, engrossed. The trees partly blocked their view, sometimes the torches disappeared beneath the leaves. They tried to see the men down below; but the balcony jutting out concealed the door, and they could only make out Comte Muffat slumped on the bench like a black sack, his face in his handkerchief. A cab had pulled up, and Lucy recognized Maria Blond, yet another woman in a hurry to get there. She wasn’t alone, a corpulent man got out of the cab behind her.

‘It’s that crook Steiner,’ said Caroline. ‘Do you mean to say he hasn’t been sent back to Cologne yet? I want to see his expression when he comes in.’

They turned round, but ten minutes later when Maria Blond appeared, after taking the wrong staircase twice, she was on her own. And when Lucy, surprised, asked her why, she said:

‘Him! Well, my dear, you don’t suppose he’d come up, do you? It’s already wonderful that he came with me to the front door! There are almost a dozen of them down there smoking their cigars.’

All the men had indeed met up outside the hotel. They had wandered along to have a look at the boulevards, they greeted each other and exclaimed about the death of poor Nana. Then they discussed politics and strategies. Bordenave, Labordette, Prullière, and others as well had enlarged the group, and now they were listening to Fontan sketching out his plan to take Berlin in five days.

Meanwhile Maria Blond, shaken with emotion, was in front of the bed, whispering like the others:

‘Poor thing! Last time I saw her was in the grotto at the Gaîté.’

‘Oh, she’s not the same, not the same,’ Rose Mignon repeated, with a wan smile of despair.

Two more women arrived: Tatan Néné and Louise Violaine. They had been wandering round the Grand Hôtel for the last twenty minutes, sent from pillar to post. They had gone up and down more than thirty staircases

in the midst of a chaos of travellers who were making haste to get out of Paris in the panic of war and all the commotion on the boulevards. So when they went in they collapsed into chairs, too tired even to look at the dead woman. And just then a loud noise erupted from the room next door; trunks were being moved across the floor and there was bumping of furniture, accompanied by the guttural accents of foreigners. It was a young Austrian couple. Gaga told them that while Nana was in her death throes, the occupants of the adjoining room had been chasing each other round. And as a single locked door separated the two rooms, you could hear them laughing and kissing when they caught each other.

‘Come on, we must go,’ said Clarisse. ‘We can’t bring her back now. Are you coming, Simonne?’

They all looked at the bed in the corner and didn’t move. But they were getting ready to leave, giving their skirts little pats. Alone at the window, Lucy had leaned out again. Sadness was tightening her throat, as if a profound melancholy had risen from the yelling crowd. Torches were still going past, giving off showers of sparks. The troops of men in their white smocks stretched into the distance, into the dark, like lambs led by night to the slaughter. And out of this confusion, out of these dizzying masses streaming past, came a breath of terror and a vast pity for the massacres to come. They were getting wilder, their cries disintegrating in feverish excitement as they rushed headlong into the unknown, out there beyond the black wall of the horizon.

‘To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!’

Lucy turned round again, with her back to the window and, very pale, whispered:

‘My God, what will become of us?’

The ladies shook their heads. They were grave, very apprehensive about what was happening.

‘For my part,’ said Caroline Héquet, coolly, ‘I am going to London tomorrow. Maman is already there and is getting a house ready for me. I am definitely not letting myself be murdered in Paris.’

Her mother, being a cautious woman, had already made her place all her money abroad. One never knew how a war would end. But Maria Blond got cross; she was patriotic and talked about following the army.

‘What a scaredy-cat! Yes, if they wanted me, I’d dress up as a man and take a potshot at those Prussian swine! If we all perish, well, so what? Our lives aren’t worth that much, are they?’

Blanche de Sivry flared up:

‘Don’t say bad things about the Prussians! They are men just like any others and not always chasing after women like your Frenchmen! They have just expelled that little Prussian who was with me, a lad who’s very sweet and very rich, wouldn’t harm a fly. It’s disgraceful, it’s ruinous for me. And if they start annoying me, I’ll go and find him in Germany!’

So while they were quarrelling, Gaga muttered sadly:

‘It’s over for me, I never have any luck. It’s only a week since I managed to pay off my little house in Juvisy, and God knows it was difficult enough! Lili had to help me out. And now they’ve declared war, the Prussians will come and burn everything. How do they expect me to start all over again at my age?’

‘I don’t give a damn,’ Clarisse declared. ‘I’ll be bound to find somebody.’

‘Yes of course,’ Simonne added. ‘It’ll be a bit strange. But perhaps things will pick up after all…’

And her smile said it all! Tatan Néné and Louise Violaine were of the same opinion. The former said she’d had a wonderful time with the military. Oh, they were lovely boys, they would go through fire and flood for a woman. But as the ladies had raised their voices too much, Rose Mignon, still sitting on the trunk by the bed, made them be quiet with a soft ‘shush’. They stopped short, with a sideways glance at the corpse as if this plea for silence had come from the very depths of the curtains. And in the heavy silence which followed, into the peaceful oblivion in which they could sense the stiff body stretched out near them, burst the shouts of the crowd:

‘To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!’

But soon they forgot again. Léa de Horn, who ran a political salon where former ministers of Louis-Philippe delivered fine epigrams, went on in a very low voice, with a shrug of the shoulders:

‘What a mistake, this war is! What bloodthirsty stupidity!’

At once Lucy took up the defence of the Empire. She had slept with a Prince of the Imperial Blood, the war was a point of family honour for her.

‘My dear girl, we couldn’t put up with any more insults, the honour of France rests on this war… Oh I’m not saying that because of the prince, you know. He was a real rat! Just think, in the evening when he went to bed he hid his money in his boots and when we played bezique he used beans because one day, just for fun, I made a grab for the stake-money. But I have to be fair. The Emperor was quite right.’

Léa shook her head with an air of superiority like a woman who is repeating the opinion of important people. And raising her voice, said:

‘It’s the end. They are all mad in the Tuileries. France should have got rid of them before…’

They all interrupted her angrily. What did this crazy radical have against the Emperor? Wasn’t the world a happy place? Was business not going well? Paris would never enjoy itself so much again.

Gaga’s mettle was up.

‘Shut up all of you! You are silly, you don’t know what you are saying. I lived through Louis-Philippe’s reign, it was a time that was full of skinflints and people without a bean. Then came Forty-eight!* That was their famous Republic and what a disgusting thing it was! After February I was dying of hunger, I’m telling you. But if you had lived through all that, you would get down on your knees to the Emperor, he has been a real father to us, yes, a father…’

They had to calm her down. She went on, with religious fervour:

‘O God, please try to give the victory to the Emperor! Keep the Empire for us!’

They all echoed this prayer. Blanche admitted to lighting candles for the Emperor. Caroline had fallen for him and had hung around wherever he was likely to pass for two months, without managing to attract his attention. And the others burst out furiously against the Republicans, and talked about exterminating them at the frontier so that Napoleon III, after beating the enemy, might reign in peace in the midst of universal rejoicing.

‘That filthy Bismarck, there’s another dirty swine for you!’ Maria Blond remarked.

‘And when you think that he was one of mine!’ Simonne cried. ‘If only I’d known, I’d have put some poison in his glass.’

But Blanche, still conscious of the expulsion of her little Prussian, dared to defend Bismarck. Perhaps he wasn’t so very wicked. Everyone had their

job to do. She added:

‘He adores women, you know.’

‘What odds is that to us?’ said Clarisse. ‘We don’t want to get him into bed, do we?’

‘There are always too many men like that,’ declared Louise Violaine solemnly. ‘Better to go without than have anything to do with such monsters.’

And so the discussion went on. They tore strips off Bismarck, each belabouring him in her Bonapartist zeal, while Tatan Néné went on in a vexed tone:

‘That Bismarck! They make me mad talking about him! Oh, I can’t stand the man! I never knew him, of course! One can’t know everybody.’

‘Never mind,’ concluded Léa de Horn. ‘That Bismarck is about to give us a good thrashing.’

She was unable to go on. The ladies turned on her. What? A thrashing? It was Bismarck who would be sent back to where he had come from with bayonets at his back. Had this unpatriotic Frenchwoman quite finished?

‘Hush!’ whispered Rose Mignon, offended by the din they were making.

They were again conscious of the cold body lying there. They all stopped at once, embarrassed, faced with the fact of death once more, and the dull fear of the disease. On the boulevard the hoarse and ragged shouts continued:

‘To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!’

Then when they were just deciding to leave, a voice called to them from the corridor.

‘Rose, Rose!’

Astonished, Gaga opened the door and disappeared for a moment. Then when she came back:

‘My dear, it’s Fauchery out there. He doesn’t want to come any further, he’s beside himself because you’re remaining close to the corpse.’

Mignon had managed to induce the journalist to go up. Lucy, still at the window, leaned out, and saw the men on the pavement with their faces upturned, waving vigorously. Mignon, exasperated, was shaking his fists. Steiner, Fontan, Bordenave, and the others were spreading out their arms in gestures of worry and reproach, while Daguenet, in order not to

compromise himself, was simply smoking his cigar with his hands behind his back.

‘It’s true, my dear,’ said Lucy, leaving the window open, ‘I promised to make you go downstairs… They are all shouting to us to come down.’

Rose reluctantly slid off the wooden trunk. She murmured:

‘I’m coming, I’m coming… I’m no use to her any more now, of course… We’ll ask a nun to come.’

And she moved around the room, looking for her hat and shawl. Mechanically she filled a bowl of water on the washstand and washed her hands and face while she was speaking:

‘I don’t know why I’m so upset. We were not very nice to each other while she was alive. Yet it’s made me feel odd… Oh, I’ve got all kinds of thoughts in my head, I want to die too, I feel it’s the end of the world… Yes, I need some fresh air.’

The corpse had begun to stink. After being there quite unconcerned for some while, the women now panicked.

‘Come on, come on, girls,’ said Gaga. ‘It’s not healthy up here.’

They left rapidly, glancing briefly at the bed. But while Lucy, Blanche, and Caroline were still there, Rose gave a last look round, wanting to leave the room in order. She drew a curtain in front of the window. Then she decided the lamp wasn’t appropriate, they needed a candle. And after lighting one from a brass candlestick on the mantelpiece, she placed it on the bedside table next to the body. A bright light suddenly lit up the dead girl’s face. It was terrifying. They all shivered and escaped.

‘Oh, she’s not the same, she’s not the same,’ muttered Rose Mignon, the last to leave.

And she left, closing the door behind her. So Nana was on her own with her face upturned in the candlelight. It was a charnel house, and in it a heap of pus and blood, a shovelful of rotten flesh, dumped there on the pillow. Pustules covered the whole face, with one pimple touching the next. And withered and sunken, they looked grey and muddy, already like earth mould on this shapeless pulp whose features could no longer be made out. One eye, the left, had been completely swallowed by the seething purulence. The other, half open, was sinking like a black and ruinous hole. The nose was still suppurating. A reddish crust starting on one cheek was invading the mouth and tugging it into a repulsive grin. And on this horrible and

grotesque mask of nothingness, the hair, the beautiful hair still shining with its own sunlight, was flowing out in a golden stream. Venus was decomposing. It was as if the virus she had caught from the gutter, from the carcasses left by the roadside, this ferment with which she had poisoned a whole race, had now come to the surface of her face and rotted it.

The room was empty. A great breath of despair rose from the boulevard and lifted the curtain.

‘To Berlin! To Berlin! To Berlin!’

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EXPLANATORY NOTES

3 *Variétés*: founded in 1807, this well-known theatre was, and still is, situated at 7–8 Boulevard Montmartre. Declared a *monument historique* in 1975, it was one of the many small theatres on or near the *grands boulevards*. Several of Jacques Offenbach's stunningly successful operettas (which Zola detested) were put on there, including *La Belle Hélène* (1864) and *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein* (1867), in which the notorious courtesan-actress Hortense Schneider, one of the models for Nana, played the starring roles.

4 *Exhibition*: L'Exposition Universelle (i.e. World Fair), held in Paris in 1867.

5 *Figaro*: this important Paris newspaper became a daily in 1867; it was particularly well known for its dramatic and literary criticism and its witty society gossip-columns.

8 *Bourse*: Napoleon Bonaparte laid the first stone of the Bourse (now the Palais Brongniart) in 1808. Home of the Paris Stock Exchange, it was officially opened in November 1826, under the Restoration, and became the hub of financial activity in France throughout the nineteenth century. The introduction of an electronic trading system in 1987 led to the resiting of the Bourse (now Euronext, Paris) and the designation of the Palais Brongniart as a historical monument.

10 *Louis-Philippe*: the 'bourgeois' King Louis-Philippe came to the throne in 1830 and was removed by the February 1848 Revolution.

11 *Councillor of State*: under the 1852 constitution of the Second Empire, the State Council had the important function of drafting all legislation to be presented to the Senate (the upper chamber of the Parliament) and the Legislative Body (the lower chamber). It also acted as legal adviser to the executive branch, adjudicated claims against the State, and assisted with the presentation of the budget. Its members were all appointed by the Emperor.

13 *la Courtille*: an amusement park at the bottom of the rue de Belleville. It was the point of departure of the famous 'descent from la Courtille', a fancy-dress parade that formed part of the Paris Carnival (held annually since the sixteenth century or earlier, except for the years between 1952 and 1997).

16 *Casino*: the Casino Cadet, in the Rue Cadet, opened in February 1859. It was a place of popular entertainment and a haunt of prostitutes.

18 *Café de Madrid*: a restaurant situated on the Boulevard Montmartre opposite the Théâtre des Variétés. It was popular with journalists, writers, and politicians.

18 *Passage Jouffroy*: the *passages* were covered arcades, early nineteenth-century shopping malls, built in Paris during the Restoration (1814–30) and the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830–48). They represented an enclosed space which mixed social types in the pursuit of retail purchase, sociability, and leisure. The German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin used the arcades as the focus for his work on the 'phantasmagoria' of modern urban experience and consumer culture: see my introduction to Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* (Oxford World's Classics, 2008). The Passage Jouffroy, built in 1845, runs between the Boulevard Montmartre, in the 9th *arrondissement*, and the Rue de la Grange-Batelière. It was built along the line of the Passage des Panoramas (see notes to pp. 27, 160), on the opposite side of the Boulevard

Montmartre, in order to capitalize on the popularity of the latter. It was the first Parisian *passage* built entirely of metal and glass.

Boule Noire: on the Boulevard des Martyrs; described by the Goncourt brothers in their novel *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865).

King Dagobert: king of all France from AD 628 to 638. Last Frankish king of the Merovingian dynasty; there is a very popular comic song about him.

Postilion of Longjumeau: the handsome, irresistible hero of the comic opera of that name by A. Adam (1803–56), better known for the ballet music *Giselle*.

21 *Rue de Provence*: streetwalkers' territory, just north of the Boulevard Haussmann. Fauchery lives nearby.

Universal Exhibition: see note to p. 4.

27 *Passage des Panoramas*: see notes to pp. 18, 160.

30 *Rambouillet*: some 35 miles south-east of Paris, well known for its forest and palace.

31 *Batignolles*: a district in the north-west of Paris.

33 *Boissier's*: see note to p. 65.

34 *Rue de la Goutte d'Or*: Nana grew up in a dingy tenement house in the slummy area of the Chapelle district (see p. 201), east of the Boulevard Barbès and north of the Boulevard Rochechouart, described at length in *L'Assommoir*: Rue Polonceau (p. 262) and the Rue des Poissonniers (p. 201) are just round the corner.

35 *Bercy*: district in the 12th *arrondissement*, on the right bank of the Seine, notable as an area of wine warehouses.

36 *bezique*: a nineteenth-century trick-taking card game for two players, using a double deck of sixty-four cards.

50 *Rue Miromesnil*: in the smart 8th *arrondissement*, just north of the Champs-Élysées.

Nazar-Eddin: Naser ed-Din, born 1831, Shah of Persia from 1848 until his assassination in 1896.

52 *Cercle Impérial*: an exclusive gambling club frequented by the Emperor's social circle. Situated on the corner of the Avenue Gabriel and the Rue des Champs-Elysées.

recent successes: in 1866 Prussia had defeated Austria in a short war. Otto von Bismarck, the redoubtable Prussian statesman, dominated German and European affairs from the early 1860s until 1890; he was the first Chancellor of the German Empire between 1871 and 1890.

54 *Mexico*: an allusion to the disastrous Mexican War (1861–7). Napoleon III's attempt to establish an empire under the Austrian emperor's brother, the Archduke Maximilian, ended in embarrassing failure when French troops were driven out of Mexico and Maximilian himself was executed (19 June 1867). This execution was depicted in a series of paintings and prints by Édouard Manet.

55 *2 December*: two coups brought Napoleon III to power: the first on 2 December 1851, when as President of the Second Republic he had seized power, the second on the same date the following year, when he abolished the Republic and had himself proclaimed Emperor.

56 *Queen Augusta*: wife of King William of Prussia.

Madeleine: the grandest and smartest of modern Paris churches, built in the style of a Greek temple between 1762 and 1842, at the west end of the *grands boulevards*. The Muffats' house is nearby.

60 *Tuileries*: the Tuileries Palace was a royal and imperial palace which stood on the right bank of the River Seine. It was the usual Parisian residence of most French monarchs, from Henri IV

(r. 1589–1610) to Napoleon III, until it was destroyed by fire during the Paris Commune in 1871.

Legitimists: diehard royalist supporters of the 'legitimate' line of French kings, the elder Bourbon line, deposed in the 1830 Revolution, as opposed to the Orléanist King Louis-Philippe (see note to p. 10).

Montauban: in the south-west of France, a comfortably safe distance—nearly 400 miles—from the prying eyes and gossipy tongues of the capital.

62 *Weber*: Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) was one of the first significant composers of the Romantic period in Germany. He greatly influenced the development of Romantic opera.

63 *Wagner*: the Paris public had not taken kindly to Wagner's music: in 1861 *Tannhäuser* and in 1867 *Rienzi* were badly received.

La Patti: the brilliant Adelina Patti (1843–1919) often sang at the Paris Opéra. She enjoyed particular success during the 1860s at the Théâtre-Italien in the role of Rosina in Rossini's *Barber of Seville.*

64 *Folies-Dramatiques*: the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques opened in 1832 on the site of the old Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique on the Boulevard du Temple. Under the famous actor Frédérick Lemaître it became a noted venue for melodrama. In 1862 the theatre moved to the Rue de Bondy in the 10th *arrondissement* and the repertoire began to specialize in operetta. *Madame Favart* by Offenbach was put on in 1878, his *La Fille du tambour-major* in 1879.

65 *Boissier . . . Catherine . . . Latinville's*: high-class confectioners founded in the nineteenth century.

Prince of Scotland: for the Prince of Scotland we can read the son of Queen Victoria, the notoriously lecherous Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII, an ardent admirer of women of high or low degree.

67 *Viroflay*: a village south-west of Paris, not far from Versailles.

70 *Brébant's*: a well-known smart caterer. The Brébant restaurant was (and still is) situated on the Boulevard Poissonnière, not far from the Variétés.

80 *Meursault . . . Chambertin or Léoville*: the caterer has sized Nana up: these are the most obvious top-class white and red burgundies and claret.

Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer: a seaside resort in Normandy occasionally frequented by Zola himself.

Faubourg Saint-Antoine: a working-class suburb of Paris, east of the Bastille.

83 *Juvisy*: a few miles south of Paris.

84 *Salines des Landes*: the Landes was a swampy district extending inland from the Atlantic and south from the vineyards of the Bordeaux region to just north of Biarritz. It was reclaimed in the nineteenth century as a vast pine forest. The Salines were salt marshes.

86 *Coromandel*: on the east coast of India in the Bay of Bengal.

93 *Peters'*: a high-class restaurant in the Passage Mirès (now the Passage des Princes).

100 *Vernet . . . Potier*: Charles-Gabriel Potier (1775–1838) and Charles-Joseph Vernet (1790–1848) were actors at the Théâtre des Variétés.

105 *Loiret*: a *département* south of Paris; its chief town is Orléans.

109 *'If Your Highness . . . go in...'*: Ludovic Halévy (1834–1908), French librettist and novelist who, in collaboration with Henri Meilhac, wrote the librettos for most of the operettas of Jacques Offenbach, told Zola the story of how the Prince of Wales (see note to p. 65) visited Hortense Schneider (see note to p. 3) in her dressing room at the Variétés while she was appearing in *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*, the premiere of which took place on 12 April

1867 to coincide with the opening of the Exposition Universelle. (In Chapter 9 Zola gives Nana the leading role in an operetta entitled *La Petite Duchesse*.)

119 *Courtyard and garden*: one of the first theatre houses in Paris was the 'Salle des Machines' at the Tuileries Palace. It was situated between the Tuileries Garden and the Carrousel courtyard. At the time, stage left and stage right were called 'côté de la Reine' (Queen's side) and 'côté du Roi' (King's side), referring to their boxes in the theatre house. After the French Revolution of 1789 it was prohibited to talk about the royalty, so the two expressions became 'côté cour' (courtyard side), because the Queen's box was on the Carrousel courtyard side, and 'côté jardin' (garden side) because the King's box was on the side of the Tuileries Garden.

flats: a flat (short for scenery flat) or coulisse is a flat piece of theatrical scenery which is painted and positioned on stage so as to give the appearance of buildings or other background.

122 *flies*: a fly system, or theatrical rigging system, is a system of rope lines, pulleys, counterweights, and related devices that enables a stage crew to fly (hoist) quickly, quietly, and safely components such as curtains, lights and scenery.

124 *Judas hole*: a small hole through which a person can spy without being seen from the other side.

134 *Bougival*: an outer western suburb of Paris, on the Seine. It became known as 'the cradle of Impressionism', since many leading Impressionists painted country scenes in this area.

144 *'tu'*: the familiar second-person singular pronoun which, with its related words and forms, is used when addressing relatives, close friends, and children.

145 *fortifications*: built along the northern limits of Paris beyond the outer boulevards. Nana used to roam around there in search of fun as a precocious little girl; a rather boring and insalubrious countryside.

148 *Parmentier*: Antoine-Augustin Parmentier (1837–1913) was an agronomist, best known for his vocal promotion of the potato as a food source.

152 *victoria*: a low, light, four-wheeled carriage with a folding hood.

156 *cour d'honneur*: a three-sided ceremonial courtyard, created by flanking the main central block with symmetrical advancing secondary wings containing minor rooms.

Henri IV: (1553–1610), King of France from 1589 to 1610. He was the first monarch of France from the House of Bourbon.

160 *Passage des Panoramas*: see notes to pp. 18, 27. Colin Jones writes:

> Though the bottom line was always a commercial one, the arcades also functioned as places of elite entertainment: besides cafés and restaurants, they tended to have attractions which combined the trapping of science with sheer entertainment. The Passage des Panoramas, for example, on the Boulevard Montmartre became the core of a labyrinthine leisure complex, which did indeed extend, as its name suggested, to panoramas and dioramas. Other regular participants in arcade life were bookshops, reading-rooms, milliners, patisseries, umbrella-shops, toy-makers and tobacconists. (*Paris: The Biography of a City* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), 288.)

162 *Mâcon*: a town in southern Burgundy on the Saône, about 250 miles south-east of Paris.

165 *Vendôme columns and obelisks*: the column is a tall one of bronze, forged from captured enemy guns and depicting the victories of Napoleon's Grande Armée; it stands in the Place Vendôme, north of the Tuileries Gardens. The obelisk, brought from Luxor in Egypt in 1836, stands at the end of these gardens in the Place de la Concorde.

166 *Café Anglais*: on the Boulevard des Italiens; a haunt of expensive prostitutes. The Café Riche (p. 210) was opposite. The latter is the scene of an important episode in chapter 4 of Zola's *The*

Kill (1872), the second novel in the Rougon-Macquart series.

167 *"La Mouche d'or"*: 'The Golden Fly'.

170 *heredity*: *Nana* is a sequel to the seventh Rougon-Macquart novel, *L'Assommoir* (1875), in which Anna ('Nana') Coupeau is born and grows up in the Paris slums. Fauchery's article 'La Mouche d'or' portrays Nana as the product of a diseased family and class. Heredity, milieu, and historical context play major roles in her life, as they did in the life of her mother, Gervaise Macquart, who has a weak will and a predisposition to drink inherited from her father, Antoine Macquart. Gervaise establishes a laundry in the working-class district of the Goutte d'Or. Her husband, Coupeau, however, falls from a roof while working and sustains an injury that leads him into a life of idleness and alcoholism. The return of Gervaise's former lover Lantier to lodge with the Coupeau family marks the beginning of Gervaise's and Coupeau's decline into abject poverty, and Nana's into debauchery.

177 *building sites by the Opéra*: Garnier's grandiose Opera House was under construction from 1862 to 1874.

178 *La Trinité*: the Église de la Sainte-Trinité is a Roman Catholic church in the 9th *arrondissement*. It was built during the Second Empire between 1861 and 1867. (It was the location of the funeral of Hector Berlioz in 1869 and of Georges Bizet in 1875.)

191 *Twelfth Night cake . . . bean*: the Twelfth Night cake was an ornamental cake eaten on the evening of the twelfth day of Christmas; it contained a bean, and if the person receiving the slice containing the bean was a woman, she could choose the Twelfth Night King.

193 *Bouffes*: the Bouffes-Parisiens theatre was founded in 1855 by Offenbach for the performance of *opéra bouffe* (comic opera) and operetta, beginning with Offenbach's own *Orphée aux Enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld). The theatre was originally in the Champs-Élysées and transferred in December 1855 to the Passage Choiseul.

198 *Quartier de l'Europe*: the streets immediately to the east, west, and north of the Gare Saint-Lazare are named after European capitals and other large cities.

201 *La Chapelle*: the district adjoining Montmartre to the east; see note to p. 34.

206 *Talma*: François-Joseph Talma (1763–1826) was Napoleon's favourite actor.

208 *Les Halles*: the great food market built in cast iron and glass during the Second Empire. It is the focus of the third novel of the Rougon-Macquart series, *The Belly of Paris* (1873).

210 *Asnières*: now a north-western suburb of Paris.

tonneau: a throwing game where players try to throw pellets into a barrel with small holes in the top.

Bullier's: a well-known dance hall in the Quartier Latin, at the end of the Boulevard Saint-Michel, where it runs into the Avenue de l'Observatoire. It was frequented by students, whereas the Bal Mabille (see pp. 256, 317) on the Champs-Élysées was more up-market.

211 *Gymnase*: the Théâtre du Gymnase still exists, on the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle.

Rue du Faubourg-Montmartre: the girls are moving into the sleazier streets north of the main boulevards.

213 *registered*: registration as a prostitute would entail, among other restrictions, having to attend regular medical examinations.

Saint-Lazare: a medieval leper hospital, later a monastery, this was now a women's prison and reformatory in the Faubourg Saint-Denis; a specially large section was reserved for prostitutes, with a hospital annexe for the treatment of venereal disease. In 1868, 4,831 prostitutes were held there in squalid conditions in overcrowded dormitories; lesbianism was rife.

215 *Mademoiselle Mars*: Anne Boutet (1779–1847), the most renowned comic actress of her age who distinguished herself at the Comédie-Française until 1841.

222 *Folies-Dramatiques*: see note to p. 64.

232 *Parc Monceau*: in the 17th *arrondissement*, still one of the smartest parts of Paris. The mansion of Saccard and Renée in *The Kill* is situated there.

235 *'Avenue de Villiers'*: in the 17th *arrondissement*, containing many grand *hôtels*.

238 *Rue de Lappe*: a seedy little street, now full of bars and restaurants, running eastwards from close by the Place de la Bastille.

245 *Gobelins tapestries*: the Manufacture des Gobelins is a historic tapestry factory located at 42 Avenue des Gobelins in the 13th *arrondissement*. It supplied the court of the French monarchs from Louis XIV onwards. It is now run by the French Ministry of Culture.

point de Venise lace: a Venetian needle lace from the seventeenth century.

248 *Philippe Auguste*: King of France from 1180 to 1223.

bezants: circular heraldic figures, gold in colour.

256 *Bois*: the Bois de Boulogne.

Maison d'Or: also known as the Maison Dorée (the 'Gilded House'); a famous restaurant located on the Boulevard des Italiens. The most expensive restaurant in Paris, it was a favourite haunt of the wealthy and dissolute society depicted in *Nana*. It closed in 1902.

Mabille: see note to p. 210.

270 *Queen Pomaré*: this decrepit old courtesan's nickname comes from the contemporary queen of Tahiti, which had become a French protectorate in 1847.

272 *Daumont-style*: a style of equipage promoted during the French Restoration period (1814–30) by the Duc d'Aumont (1762–1831). With this style, four horses were used but, rather than a coachman's seat, a box (*coffre*) was installed in its place, and the horses were ridden by postilions.

guipure lace: a type of bobbin lace which connects the motifs with bars or plaits rather than net or mesh.

275 *curricles*: various types of carriage are mentioned in this paragraph: charabanc—a large horse-drawn, open-topped carriage; dog-cart—a light horse-drawn carriage with a box behind the driver's seat; victoria—see note to p. 152; landau—a four-wheeled enclosed carriage; four-in-hand—a carriage drawn by a hitch of four horses having the lines rigged in such a way that it can be driven by a single driver; spider carriage—a small, sporty open carriage; curricle—a smart, light two-wheeled carriage large enough for the driver and one passenger, and usually drawn by a carefully matched pair of horses.

284 *the Gaîté*: in 1862 during Haussmann's modernization of Paris the Théâtre de la Gaîté on the Boulevard du Temple in the 3rd *arrondissement* was relocated to the nearby Rue Papin. Within a decade its focus began to shift from melodrama to operetta and opera, and the theatre also came to be known as the Gaîté-Lyrique. Offenbach was the director of the theatre from 1873 to 1874.

292 *racing salon*: before race-meetings, a room for laying bets was opened in the Grand Hôtel in the Boulevard des Capucines.

313 *Boucher*: François Boucher (1703–70), Rococo painter, associated with frivolous and erotic themes.

315 *grand siècle*: the seventeenth century of Louis XIII (r. 1610–43) and, above all, Louis XIV, the illustrious 'Sun-King' (r. 1643–1715).

343 *Café de Madrid*: see note to p. 18.

359 *Lariboisière*: a recently built hospital in the district where Nana grew up (as described in *L'Assommoir*); in fact, her father had been one of its roof-tilers.

363 *féerie*: sometimes translated as 'fairy play', this was a theatrical genre known for fantasy plots and spectacular visuals, including lavish scenery and mechanically worked stage effects. *Féeries* blended music, dancing, pantomime, and acrobatics, as well as magical transformations created by designers and stage technicians, to tell stories with clearly defined melodrama-like morality and an extensive use of supernatural elements. The genre developed in the early 1800s and became immensely popular in France throughout the nineteenth century, influencing the development of burlesque, musical comedy, and film.

364 *story*: in 1873 Blanche d'Antigny (1840–74), a celebrated courtesan-actress, one of the models for Nana, left Paris following a scandal caused by the financial ruin of one of her lovers. (She had previously been the mistress of the Russian police chief Mesentzov, who took her to St Petersburg and, when she was forced to leave Russia by special order of the Tsarina, to Wiesbaden.) She went to Cairo where she appeared on the stage and had an affair with the Khedive (the Ottoman ruler of the country). In June 1874 she returned to Paris infected with typhoid fever and died a slow, painful death, penniless and deserted by all her friends. She was buried in Père-Lachaise Cemetery. In his elaboration of the final chapter of *Nana* Zola combines these details with the fact that a smallpox epidemic had ravaged Paris between March and July 1870.

365 *the Legislative Body had voted for war*: France declared war on Prussia on 19 July 1870. Relations between France and Prussia had been strained since the Prussian defeat of Austria in 1866. France saw the balance of power in Europe shifting too much in Prussia's favour, while Prussia saw France as the main obstacle to a unified Germany. A disagreement over the succession to the throne of Spain gave Bismarck the chance he wanted. By publishing an amended and insulting version of the 'Ems telegram', detailing the king of Prussia's response to Napoleon III's request for assurances that no member of the (Prussian) Hohenzollern family would seek the Spanish throne (and thereby create the possibility of a hostile alliance between Spain and Prussia), Bismarck provoked France into taking the role of aggressor. The French hoped to achieve a quick victory by marching their armies east, straight to Berlin. Instead, the Prussian armies crossed the Rhine before the French, beat the French into retreat, and invaded France. On 2 September Napoleon III, surrounded with his army at Sedan, was forced to surrender and was taken prisoner. This signified the immediate end of the Empire. The Franco-Prussian War and its aftermath are described in the nineteenth novel of the Rougon-Macquart series, *La Débâcle* (1892).

366 *Bonaparte at Austerlitz*: Napoleon's victory in 1805 over a combined Austro-Russian army had often been a subject for painters; the best known is by Baron Gérard (1770–1837).

367 *juste-au-corps*: a tight-fitting garment worn, as by dancers and gymnasts, over the upper body.

369 *voltaire*: an armchair with a low seat and a high back.

374 *Forty-eight*: in February 1848 a ban on a so-called reform banquet (one of a series of political meetings organized by the liberal opposition) led to demonstrations. Barricades went up, and a surge of revolutionary activity led to the abdication of the king, Louis Philippe. A Republic was declared, and political clubs sprang up to debate ideas for radical social reform. On 25 February armed workmen interrupted the deliberations of the provisional government and demanded that the right to work should be guaranteed. This led to the creation of 'national workshops' for unemployed workers. When elections took place on 23 April, the majority of those elected to the National Assembly were moderates, drawn mainly from the provincial bourgeoisie. Leaders of extremist socialist groups were imprisoned. When the government

decided, on 21 June, to disband the national workshops, workers and students took to the streets in protest. The government decided on repression. The army and National Guard killed thousands of protesters; 1,500 were shot without trial, 25,000 arrested, and 11,000 imprisoned or deported.

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